

Jujutsushi Wa Yuusha Ni Narenai

Act 6: Killer

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Chapter 70 - Solo Dungeoning Again

“UAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

After screaming, pounding against the transfer circle on the platform, rolling on the floor crying, letting out all my pent up emotions, I finally regained enough calm to face reality.

“Kenzaki Asunaaaa... that, damn bitch...”

There it was, betrayal in plain sight.

Due to Souma-kun entering the scene, I let my guard down thinking I was safe. With him there, I would be relieved from continuing with this ridiculous farce of a party play and having to make all those last minute strategies with those wonderful harem girls. No longer would I need to engage in that bullshit.

Heck, from their perspective, with Souma Yuuto, they could just steamroll through this dungeon without worry. They’d no longer need to alienate me, nor need to be afraid of Mei-chan anymore. Everyone working together, with Souma-kun as the center, this was how the dungeon capture was supposed to be. There was no motive to commit such an act of practically murder like leaving me behind... Well, that’s how it should have been.

“Dammit, is this what I get for driving a proud sword girl into a corner!?”

Most likely, Kenzaki Asuna had done it in the spur of the moment. She might not have realized what she had done.

Apparently, Mei-chan’s beating her into what was essentially becoming my puppet had brought her mind to the brink.

After being saved by Souma-kun, and placed in a situation where teleporting away from this wretched cave was moments away... She’d finally relaxed. That moment was the perfect chance, and she knew it. Because that was exactly how Souma-kun had been separated from them.

By pushing someone out during the transfer process, it was certainly possible to separate said person from the party. In order to be rid of me, that was the perfect chance. The berserker, Mei-chan, would be hard to push, but a frail

shaman like me? She could do it easy, with a light push even.

“Mei-chan’s gonna be totally pissed right around now”

Even without Mei-chan, there was no way Kenzaki Asuna would be let off without blame. She had a lot of grudges against me, but even then, we were still in the same party for a time and I had helped them out a lot. So she knew it was a bad idea, but still did it.

Her notion was a clear act of betrayal towards an ally. A criminal act I could claim. Since it was as if she’d pushed me in front of a moving train.

“Just hope she doesn’t up and kill Kenzaki”

Well, with Souma-kun around, I doubt it’d turn out like that. Even for Mei-chan, it wouldn’t be a good idea to turn Souma-kun and his whole party into enemies, she would be easily subdued. Preferably, I’d like if Class rep did some of her top-class mediating, peacefully resolve the issue... Though I feel like she’d first collapse from stomach cramps under all that stress. Maybe I should have made some antacid for her.

“Not like I’m in any position to worry about others...”

Right, I should be focusing about bigger problems, namely, myself.

Everyone else had already transferred over to the new zone. And as the only person left behind, I naturally had no monster core big enough to start up the circle again.

From here on, I’d have to proceed through the dungeon alone. Yup, alone, solo capture as a frickin’ shaman.

“I’m, so screwed...”

It’s just like when I was first thrown into the dungeon. Seriously, I’m gonna have to go solo this late in the game?

Totally unfair. It’s like a Dark Souls no hit run.

“No, I gotta calm down, don’t give up... Even if it’s me, I can at least do something”

First, let’s make a quick check. My full status.

Red Fever : Puts the target into a slightly feverish state. C'mon you, can't you be like, kinda, I mean...

Pain Return : Returns the damage that the target has done in full. The injury remains. It's useful in battle and for threats, literally a double-edged sword as the description implies. I tend to use this guy more at the endgame.

Intuition Pharmacy : Provides information about ingredients' effects and such, also gives me the ability to make various concoctions with said ingredients. My lifeline. The very skill that makes a shaman, a shaman. Kinda want to concoct some poisons soon.

Blackhair Bind : Shadowy tentacles that are capable of twining around an opponent's feet. Can be braided into a makeshift rope. Has a wide range of use. Though, I wish it had some more strength.

Vile Mud Doll : A doll that moves according to the owner's will. Absolute obedience. Rem is such a good kid.

Black Bloodline : Is that blood a curse or a blessing? Even though there's nothing inherited from any predecessors, blood is still life. The body, curses, magic, faith— it influences all. Also seems to taste delicious, depending on the person.

Rotten Bog : Just one step inside, and it'll corrode your flesh, an extremely acidic swamp. My only ace in the hole.

Contra-Beat Butterfly : Pick a concoction, and these butterflies will cause the reverse effects through its scales. This one's a resource consumer, can't fire willy-nilly.

These 8 were the curses that I could use.

Next would be equipment.

Red Knife : A knife created from a Cerberus' fang. Blessed in fire, this blade can really heat things up.

Iron Dagger : A normal quality dagger.

Box cutter : Something I had since before the incident. Has a couple of spare blades.

Stones : Stones I gathered for throwing. Perfect for making Rotten Bog on walls and ceilings.

My main weapon, the iron spear, was lost during the fight with Yokomichi (truly a pity), but I did hold on to Natsukawa-san's Red Knife. A blessing amidst misfortune, as they say.

"Don't think I can advance past this cave without this"

When I unsheath this knife out of its leather scabbard, a thin coat of flames would ignite, clinging onto the red hot blade. It should work as a light source for now.

"This place actually goes deeper huh... Gotta start somewhere"

This transfer circle room was a part of the dungeon's stone ruins zones but, for some reason, this room was here, in what was clearly insect cave dominion. It was like a sudden offshoot to a teleport in the middle of the cave system.

In other words, aside from the path we used to get to this cave, there was also a path forward that Souma-kun took to get to us.

"Since Souma-kun said he came through a boss room, the ruins area shouldn't be so far off"

At least, the distance was supposed to be close enough that his Lux Elemental could detect his sister. Well, at least I hope it is.

Right now, I couldn't activate this transfer circle, so my only choice was the other route. I should first backtrack through Souma-kun's path into the ruins area, then search for another way forward. Before that though, I should find a fairy square to take a breather.

"Ok ok, no time like the present"

Even if I just sit around here, help won't come. Mei-chan will surely try to find me, but since she's been transferred away already, she can't possibly come back. The only possibility is if we manage to cross paths at some point, on our way to the collective destination that was the transfer gate located deep within this dungeon. Because of that, I had no choice but to continue alone.

Will I be able to meet up with Mei-chan, or will I meet other classmates first?

Or will I die from one of the latter's or a monster's assault? The latter conclusion felt awfully likely to happen, but I guess it's all a matter of luck.

I'll just have to do as I do.

"Oh yeah, about time I start building Rem"

I gathered mud from the area, molded it into a humanoid figure, and without using any monster parts, made the weakest specs mode of mud doll Rem.

"Hmmm, not very reliable"

Rem, who was built only from mud, was small like the first time I'd summoned her. Now, even with just mud, I felt like I could make her human sized, but it made no sense to enlarge that already fragile body. It'd only consume more mana, and worst case, might even break at the seams while moving around.

So, I kept it at doll-sized.

The resurrected Rem, appeared to be somewhat frustrated? Well, I don't mind really, she did a good job in that fight against Yokomichi.

Besides, having Rem here will alleviate the loneliness somewhat. For that peace of mind, I was super grateful.

Anyway, can't stay in this room forever. It's no fairy square, so ants might wander in. The rook spider pit that was sealed off might've been dug open by now.

Since I'm all set, let's get a move on.

"Rem, you take point and scout for enemies"

Acknowledging with a nod, Rem strode forward into the dark cave.

The current Rem could only go slightly ahead of where the light can't reach, and since she was in her initial state where her body was so fragile, she currently had no firepower. Though she did have good perception which could be used to detect enemies. They weren't as great as Natsukawa-san's, but at least provided a little comfort.

"Urk, the knife's giving off light, but not enough"

It was totally different from back in the harem party. My distance view was reduced to half of before. It wasn't like I was blind as a bat, but this cave that I had practically grown tired of, had suddenly turned into a new unknown danger zone.

Leaving the scouting work to Rem, I walked behind her, paying careful attention to my footing.

“— —!?”

I literally jolted with every little clicking and crawling sound that passed me by.

At this rate, if I ever get surrounded by a swarm of ants, it'll be over. A swarm, no, even if it's just more than two, I'm fucked.

“C-c-calm down... If any ants come out, first, make bog, then, use bind and...”

I felt so desperate, to the point where I kept going over simulations where I had to fight solo against multiple enemies, over and over, repeatedly in my head.

I felt suffocated. All this tension was weighing down hard.

I was keenly made aware of how great it was to have reliable teammates.

How long have I been walking? I felt so exhausted. But this cave wasn't easy to walk in at all. I didn't feel like I'd made any progress. I was tense too, which needlessly expended energy.

Dammit. In my current condition, I'll be completely exhausted soon, and if a crisis comes up—

“Ah, Rem! You're back meaning, it can't be good news”

Ahead of me, I caught sight of Rem, running back in a big hurry.

“Ants then?”

Although she heard me, it's not like Rem could actually reply. But she shook her head, so apparently, it wasn't ants.

“If it's not ants, then...”

It'd be a way out of the cave? That naive idea was immediately denied.

VMMMMM, by that despair inducing sound again.

“Motherfff... Goddamn Mantis right off the bat!”

Soon enough, it’s silhouette was revealed coming from the path ahead. With the Red Knife’s weak flames only dimly lighting the cave, the Knight Mantis appeared much bigger than it was. I’ve never felt more afraid of encountering one since now.

“SHAAAAAAAAA!!”

It also noticed me, and assumed an intimidating pose, raising both scythes high. Right after, its wings gyrated as it came after me.

I can’t win. Just me alone, I’m no match at all.

My head was going blank—— but, my survival instincts kicked in. I’m so fucking scared. But, my body could move. I knew for a fact that I couldn’t win, but that shouldn’t be the case for running away.

“Spread out! Rotten Bog ”

Invoking the curse using the bloodseal on my palm, Rotten Bog started to expand out in front of me. The mantis moved by slightly hovering, so obviously the stagnant bog on the floor was a non-issue for the monster.

But, it was the greatest offensive I had on me. Well, this is just for the initial set up.

“—— Blackhair Bind”

From the mantis’ shadow, tentacle-like blackhairs sprung out. They started wrapping around its limbs—— But the mantis was faster.

“SHAAA!”

With a swipe of its scythes, the monster cut down my tentacles. This is why we need actual vanguards like Mei-chan vanguarding people like me. The mantis continued towards me like it was nothing.

Likely because it was wary of the poison swamp under its feet, rather than running over on its 4 legs, the mantis really did hover right above.

The mantis flew as if it was gliding over the floor of the cave, not a square

inch of its feet touching the surface of the acidic swamp.

“Pull it down”

Blackhair bind, once more. This time, the hairs came out from within the Rotten Bog.

However, they were also cut by the scythes. The mantis shortly paused, hovering above the swamp, and with an accurate slash, cleanly dealt with the braided Blackhair Binds that had slithered out of the swamp like a tentacle monster.

It wasn't enough. I couldn't slow its approach since it could cut them down instantly.

In that case, how's this.

“Rise from chaos, bind in foul blood, stand on stained earth——”

The incantation barely finished. The mantis was already done slicing apart the rest of the tentacles, it was soon approaching the bog's perimeter. But, I made it.

I practically threw the drops of blood from my bloodseal, aiming right at the Rotten Bog.

And there, stood Rem, submerging her body fully into the bone-melting bog; she was melting apart in a rapid pace.

“——Vile Mud Doll!!”

Re-summon? No, it was more of a restructuring.

I'd remake Rem's body, not with mud, but instead the toxic solution of Rotten Bog. A human figure was a necessity in the creation of mud dolls, so I had Rem's initial body fulfill that requirement. Now I'm just hoping I finished the canto and the curse activated before the original body went to mush——

“Hold it off, Rem!”

Responding to my cry, bulky, poisonous sludge rose up from the bog acid.

Its limbs were as large as logs, with an all-around thick, massive body. Despite that, the muddy creature was dripping constantly as if it was about to collapse

in on itself.

However, Rem kept together that humanoid form, and grappled the mantis.

“KYOWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA”

The Rotten Bog monster held the large insect in its embrace, the latter’s carapace melting under the bog acid enveloping it; The mantis screeched in pain.

Now!

Now, finish it off? No, it was now the perfect chance to run the hell away.

“Keep stalling it!”

Rem was my decoy. I ran along the very edge of the cave where the bog didn’t reach. I could feel Rem and the mantis’ intense struggle behind me.

Rem’s body, probably because it was very much liquid, was on the verge of collapse already. The mantis was struggling fiercely, piercing its scythes into Rem, but slashing wasn’t very effective on that semi-liquid body. In spite of that though, all the slashing, stabbing, and general rampaging around was taking some toll, causing Rem’s body to slowly break apart.

Rem would most likely be done in before the mantis’ body melted down from the acid. And if that mantis still had any functional legs, it’d be more than capable of chasing me down and murdering me.

I didn’t have another Rem to act as a decoy, I couldn’t use this trick anymore. And depending on how much damage the mantis sustains, Blackhair Bind might not be of use in finishing it off.

I didn’t need to bet on some all-or-nothing, right now I was more likely to live if I ran. Plus, it wasn’t like if I happened to somehow defeat the creature, I would suddenly level up and get my status restored.

“Haah... Haah... ”

I forgot all about scouting ahead, I simply ran. Right now, my priority was to get away from the struggling mantis behind me.

“Spread out, Rotten Bog”

I didn't know if it'd be any help, but I cast Rotten Bogs at random intervals. If the mantis did lose its wings, plus got enough legs done in that it couldn't walk on the walls or ceiling, it might just give up instead of risking my bogs.

"Shit, shouldn't use blood so heavily"

After casting my 3rd swamp, I started to feel unsteady. Won't humans die after losing half their blood? I think it was around 2 liters on average. And since I'm smaller than the average person, I was even worse off.

Using my bloodseal did allow me to forego cutting myself every time, but I should watch it so I don't get anemic.

As I was thinking about a danger to my life quite different from the man-eating mantis struggling some distance behind me, I could see a light up ahead.

"Could it be, the exit!"

Great job, I'm proud of you. As if the dungeon was rewarding my solo struggle, I could see a light, the boundary between cave and ruins, the goal.

"Haaa... haaa... Finally, I made it, somehow"

Lurching through the exit, what I saw was a room not unlike the Orthrus' boss room. But the difference was, there was a gaping hole in the wall connecting this room to the cave.

Yeah, this, without a doubt, was the room where Souma-kun defeated that boss he mentioned. The room had good lighting too, one glance around and I could tell that there was no trace nor shadow of anyone or anything.

Guess the boss was yet to respawn? Or maybe, just defeating it once permanently kills it? At any rate, that's good news to me. I'm struggling as is, please don't ask for more.

Then again, this IS a boss room and you at least have to face some strong enemy once you enter. As if the dungeon was demanding such, an enemy did appear.

"GYOOAAAAAAHHHH!!"

Goes without saying, it was the Knight Mantis that I'd elegantly avoided just previously.

It seems Rem fucked it up quite a bit. It had lost its left scythe, the wings were gone to the point where flight was impossible, and there were various marks of corrosion all over its body. It looked practically dead.

“Tch, what a tenacious bug!”

It'd be great if it just dropped dead right now. The bug was pretty unrelenting, like it was holding some sort of grudge against me, even after it'd gotten a full body makeover.

“... Final battle, I guess”

Since it was caught up, it'd be dangerous to run and leave my back wide open. It had lost its wings, but still had the four legs. It was faster than me, and even if I put out Rotten Bogs, it seemed likely to just jump over, or simply push through with willpower alone.

Since I'd already lost Rem's base body, I won't be able to summon Super Poison Rem like earlier either.

Still, the mantis was dying. If I could just dish out a bit more damage, I should be able to kill it.

However, I didn't have any means of dealing that fatal push.

The mantis looked so unsteady, and yet, it still raised up its remaining scythe. My only weapons were the Red Knife and the dagger. Both were blades with a short reach, and it'd be suicidal of me to close in with them.

Meanwhile, its scythe had a reach much longer than a longsword. If I went up with my knife yelling out “Die Fuckface!!!” like some Yakuza shooter, I'd surely be cut down sideways. Even if I had my old spear, my ability to kill wouldn't improve.

Shit, a Shaman doesn't do close quarters combat. I won't win that way.

“SHAH! SHAaa...”

The mantis looked wary, it raised a high pitched screech, and kept its distance. The atmosphere was balls to the wall tense.

In reality, I had no power to compete against this green faced fuck. The mantis apparently hadn't realized yet. Because once it thought, “Hey, this kid's

actually weak,” this match would end with but a single move.

This wasn’t the time to be worrying. Think. I needed to think of a way to land the finishing blow on this dying mantis.

Wasn’t there something? Was there something? Something I could do to get this flaming knife inside its body?

The Red knife had the firepower to do it. As long as I stabbed it before its scythe could reach me, of course... Dammit, there was not time to find a branch somewhere and fashion it into a spear, if only my arms could stretch out— — Wait, wait wait.

“SHAAAA!!”

The mantis screeched again. It was once again back in action; it’s patience had run thin.

“ Rotten Bog!!”

I plopped in a bog on reflex.

Although not large, the Rotten Bog suddenly appearing in front of it did cause the mantis to grow cautious and it backed away.

Good, that was all I needed. Rather than a physical wall, the bog had become a psychological barrier, successfully keeping the mantis away.

Now, my turn. I’ll kill it first, before it can think to jump over or bypass the small bog.

“— —Blackhair Bind ”

I conjured up two braid-acles of hair from my own shadow. I then proceeded to have them grab the Red Knife and dagger respectively.

Ugh, I felt so stupid. It was only at these last minute showdowns, that I came up with these clearly obvious applications.

That’s right, my arms themselves can’t stretch, but Blackhair Bind could do that all day long.

“Go!!”

The two knife-tipped blackhairs flew out like arrows straight towards the

mantis.

Blackhair Bind had, at first, had a length that was just barely enough to bind around the target's ankles, but after continuous usage, binding monsters and dragging them down into the bog, it could now extend to quite a few meters. The strength and speed had both been improving little by little.

If I attach a knife to one of these tentacles, I essentially create a ranged weapon with a reach much longer than any spear. It's like the scythe and chain, but not as technical in its usage. Well anyway, since I could move the tentacles at will, I could freely attack every which way I chose. It was extremely easy to handle.

"KYYOAAAA!!"

I took aim, stabbing the two blades straight towards the mantis' torso. Though one of them was an ordinary blade, the other was blazing. On impact, a plume of flame burst out.

"Nice, it hit—oops, that was close!"

It raised a painful groan, confirming that damage had been dealt, which is when I immediately drew back the knife-tentacles.

The mantis brandished its scythe fiercely, whether intentionally or acting out in desperation, I didn't know, but my tentacles would be easily severed if touched by that. And by obvious consequence, the knives tipping said tentacles would then be dropped. I couldn't afford to let that happen.

"In that case, I'll aim somewhere your scythe can't reach... Like your back and hind legs"

Making use of my overwhelming advantage in reach, I'd take my time cutting it up until it dies. I dub it: the pin-cushion maneuver.

Although it was frustrating that I couldn't kill it in a single blow, then again, I'm supposed to be a support role. Who's big idea was it to make a Shaman fight melee?

"Take thiiis!!"

I wanted to take better aim, but it wasn't like the mantis was going to take

this lying down. It realized how it was being targeted, and took action to desperately defend itself. In other words, it started moving around like crazy.

Finding my target had become a lot harder now. I should just aim at the general location of its back. Anywhere was fine, as long as it hit.

“Uwa! Wait jus-, NO NO NO!?”

The mantis didn’t even try to register the feeble amount of damage and madly dashed towards me. This was bad, this was so bad, I was done for if it got in range.

I had to expand the Rotten Bog. Make it so that the mantis wouldn’t want to approach me.

“KYOAAAA, KISSHHHHHAAA”

“Shit, shit, shit! Ahhh, too close, stay away, stay away, dammiit!”

I kept retreating from the mantis, putting down more bog, all the while trying to find a chance to stab it with my tentacle knives. I barely edged by as the creature almost cut my body, this happened over and over again. I was desperately running around the boss room, screaming, crying all the way——

“Kyooo, kiaa....”

Under my repeated attacks and the bog’s poison, the mantis finally stopped. That terrifying scythe too, just hung there powerlessly, it looked like it won’t move anymore.

“Die, DIE!--”

The mantis was immobile. I stretched my bog under its feet, restrained it with Blackhair Bind, cast Contra-Beat Butterfly to add additional damage, and finally, pin-cushioned it with my knives.

Check and mate.

“DIEEEEEEEEE!!”

Chapter 71: Curse + Curse

“Ha, haha... Finally, finally a fairy square”

As if to congratulate me for my death match with the mantis, the next fairy square was just beyond the boss room.

For better or worse, no one else was there.

I was finally relieved of that long strenuous tension. I felt so relieved that I just plopped down on the grass and fell asleep—— But before that, I wanted to go back and get the loot, so I picked up my dead-tired body and dragged back the Knight Mantis corpse, which I had just left there in the boss room, to scavenge for parts.

“...Urgh”

I had collapsed. When I woke up, I immediately saw it, the mantis’ huge head right in my face. Talk about a rude awakening.

After retrieving the corpse, I was well past my limits, and I’d apparently passed out.

Now that I think about it, even after accomplishing the feat of soloing the Knight Mantis, I hadn’t actually leveled up AKA Ruindhilde-sama didn’t bestow me any new curses. Well, I guess it won’t be like defeating monsters in a game, and mechanically gaining new skills.

“Haahh, so tired...”

My body was still stiff from exhaustion. I must’ve slept a long while. Although I was not so exhausted, I wasn’t exactly in a battle-ready condition either. Must’ve been all that mana I ended up using.

Yeah, for the time being, I should continue resting here. There’s no point in hurrying. While I’m at it, I should also come up with a few strategies for the future.

“Uhhh, let’s see, do the laundry, make some meds, summon Rem... Nahh, I

should get something to eat first”

There weren't any snakes or shrimp worms, so I had no choice but to eat a tasteless meal of walnuts. I drank down the cool fountain water while munching on the bland walnuts. It was pretty lonely. I wanna eat meat. No, RICE, I wanna eat rice.

“...haahh”

I was the type to spend my holidays lazing around in the house, but despite feeling so unmotivated right now, I still managed to perform my tasks. I washed my uniform that'd been pretty roughed up from the repeated battles, found some Mimesis Worms to patch up patches, while gathering some flowers and plants around the fairy garden and make my meds.

The various meds such as Ointment A were also ammunition for using Contra-Beat Butterfly. I should make extra for both healing and combat purposes.

Then, I did maintenance for my weapons. Especially the Red Knife, since such rare weapons didn't just drop everywhere. It was also a great source of light, not to mention it could be used to ignite things, it really was useful for survival. Maybe I'll just permanently borrow it.

“Now then, next is Rem... No, not yet”

After completing my preparations and maintenance, my body now felt like it was in working condition, but I shouldn't over do it.

This time, I'll be using the parts from the Knight Mantis I'd defeated in the earlier death match. With those parts, I should be able to create a body, whose performance will be on par with the one from the armor bear parts. Or close to it, at least. However, in proportion to getting better performance, a big helping of mana will also be needed.

If I made her while I wasn't in tip top shape, I might just collapse from mana deficiency again. As for the blood I'd used in my earlier battle, I'm not even sure to what degree it had recovered. Worst comes to worst, I might just die from the double entendre of a lack in both mana and blood.

Let's take my time, slowly test the waters—— I thought, practically like an elected politician that had no intention of keeping their promises, so I decided

to do something else I'd been wondering about. .

"Let's practice attacking"

Of course, I mean using the new way of having Blackhair Bind hold weapons. I'd used it to kill the mantis, so it was already a proven effective method for actual combat. This was something even an amateur like me could do, since I only needed to one-sidedly attack while outside of the opponent's range.

Well, a real vanguard warrior like Mei-chan could easily shred this sort of attack, but I could at least manage gomas, skeletons, and other small mob monsters. If I could stab my opponent from a safe distance, it most definitely beat having to put down a bog and dragging it inside, not to mention the cost-effectiveness of this was better, since I'd be losing much less mana and blood.

After Mei-chan had become a Berserker, I'd subconsciously left all the actual fighting to her. Rather than trying to become stronger myself, I was more focused on how to effectively use Mei-chan's combat prowess, and how to not get in her way in battle.

Heck, with her level of power, it was the right idea too. And we'd managed to work with that.

But, she wasn't here anymore. I didn't have any allies to rely on, I was truly going solo. So right now, I needed some way to fight on my own.

Let's do it, gone will be the weakest Job! The shaman is strong! The best Job of all! We stand on the cusp of the age of curse! Long live Ruinhilde-sama!!!

"All right, let's do this nice and steady"

Okay, let's use one of the fairy walnut trees. The trunk was as thick as a human torso and the 2 branches are somewhat like arms, so it'll make a good substitute for a human figure. I tried outlining a face and other things using the sharpie I had in my pencil case that'd been lying in the deep recesses of my bag. I also drew those target circles like in dart boards, so it'd give me a picture of how accurate I was.

My weapon of choice was obviously NOT the red knife, since the tree might catch on fire, so I thought of using the iron dagger, but considering that it'll probably dull the blade, it too was a no go, so instead I made a knife carved out

of a branch as substitute.

“Seal off the path of escape, entangle— — Blackhair Bind ”

Somehow, it felt like a while since I'd done the full chant. This curse that I'd grown familiar with after repeated use, it was to the point where I could easily cast it as the normal long hair or the braided hair version.

From the shadows at my feet, a black braided hair-like tentacle slowly rose like a snake raising it's head.

“Come to think of it, can I cast these from places other than shadows?”

The basic condition of casting Blackhair Bind was that they'd need to extend from shadows. In a place with only light, it didn't work. But, as long as there was shadow, whether it'd be from mine, an enemy's or from the natural terrain, I could cast it. However, I required a visual of said shadow for it to work.

Right now at least, that was the basic activation condition for Blackhair Bind that I knew of... But, for example, could I cast it from my hands? Or maybe use the hair on my head as a medium instead?

“— —the heck!? It actually worked”

The results from the experiment: A success. I was amazed with how easy it actually was.

“Woah, it's long, and wavy”

Right now, my hair was pretty long, it reached all the way down to my heels. Also since it could move if I willed it, so the long hair was easy to operate. With that said, I could also make it hold weapons.

When I tried waving around a knife, there was no weird feeling of my head being pulled on. So apparently, it could be manipulated as normal. How the hair supported itself was a mystery, but right now, let's not worry about the small stuff.

But, I couldn't really think of a merit for using Blackhair Bind this way. It did move, but there wasn't much more power behind it. It seemed impractical to use it in actual combat. Maybe I could use it if I went bald?

Incidentally, when I dispelled it, the wavy long hair shrunk and my normal

hairstyle returned. It was a relief that my hair didn't disappear altogether.

"Ah, doing it with my hands feels a lot better"

For my next attempt, I grew them from my palm. From around the spot with my bloodseal, the hair came out in braids, it felt like I was holding rope.

However, because they were tentacles that could move freely, it felt like my very hands were stretching out.

"Yup, this style is definitely better to use with weapons"

I tried brandishing it towards the fairy walnut tree a couple of times, it had a natural feel to it. Well, even if I used it from the shadows on the ground, there wasn't much change to the accuracy, so I guess it was just the problem of my image of how to properly wield the weapon.

But, I don't think I can take this lightly. Especially since a good mental image could have a major impact on how fluidly I could control and fight using weapons.

"Kinda feels like, I'm a chain and sickle ninja"

Although it wasn't exactly like how you would picture a chain and sickle. Hmmm, it's like... umm... a throwing knife? I think? Ah, who cares.

I grabbed the substitute knife in both hands, and took a random pose.

"Wind-style... Gale Blade!"

While I shouted out some ambiguous name that I may or may not have heard in a game, black hair-like tentacles sprouted out of my hands, both wood knives shot towards the trunk. As I took aim, or more like, I just pictured the trajectory of the tentacles, and with pinpoint accuracy, they hit the neck and torso area that I'd outlined by sharpie, and came back to me like a yo-yo.

"Oh man, that was kinda awesome"

Yup, I was just praising myself.

But, if you think about it. To cut something so accurately from several meters away, just how many people are there that could do the same? Probably, other than a trained specialist, no one would be able to accurately cut and retrieve

their weapon as efficiently as I could right now.

Furthermore, add on the fact that I could manipulate it freely, isn't this chain that was the Blackhair Bind totally a cheat weapon? In reality, I did succeed in dicing away and finishing off a Mantis from outside its attack range.

"With this Blackhair Bind and add-on weapons, won't I become a chain-sickle master? No seriously"

Woah, hold that thought, calm down. I know my name is Kotarou, but I have no association with the Fuuma clan whatsoever, I have not an inkling of talent in becoming a shinobi.

"And I can't be satisfied with just this. I have to get even stronger"

In future dungeoning, I should probably expect stuff like the mantis appearing as the small-fry class of mobs. A well placed chain-sickle attack could easily deal with humans, but its lack of power against bigger foes was a cause for concern.

I wondered, couldn't I add more firepower with my current skill set?

"Hmmm..."

Should I just increase the amount of attacks? I could currently use Blackhair Bind to pop out quite a few tentacles. There was no need to be so hung up on the whole dual wielding thing. I could go tri-wielding and even quad-wielding, an omni directional attack style.

"I can get weapons from any gomas I come across but... it'll become much more difficult to control with too many of them... Just a matter of practice, I guess..."

If I could secure more weapons it'll add more ways of attack, but even if I can't use them all, I could have my extra tentacles stick to restrain enemies, like how it was originally supposed to be used. This'll lead to a more all-rounder type of attack style.

I'm worried that if I concentrate too hard on fighting, I might lose awareness of my surroundings. Before, I had Mei-chan as the vanguard, which left me free to watch all around. But, once I was at the front, I might not have the spare time to be so wary of possible attacks, for instance ambushes from ants, even if

I was extra cautious.

However, that of course is the downside of anyone going solo. Apart from close quarters combat, let's think up a method to counteract that disadvantage.

"If it's just a simple increase in firepower... Using fire should do the trick"

Fire was a great means of dealing extra damage. The size of the flame didn't matter, what mattered was the heat output. With the red knife, I could easily light a fire despite my lack of pyromantic ability.

The idea was to set my blackhair tentacles on fire. They had the same feel as real hair, so I expected it to burn well...

"Wha!? Th, this smell! This won't do at all!"

I immediately dispelled it. Fortunately, with the tentacle gone, the fire also disappeared.

Although it did catch on fire, it didn't exactly go as planned. When it started to burn, it was also accompanied by a strange smoke and was only slightly lit on fire, hardly enough to actually cause any sort of injury.

Most importantly, it stank like ass.

Right, yeah, when you burn hair, there's that sickening smell that accompanies it of course. It's a given, since sulfur makes up a bit of the composition of hair. Guess it was also the same for the hair from Black Hair Bind.

At any rate, other than maybe using it as a form of harassment, it'd contribute nothing in terms of firepower. Well it might be effective on monsters with an acute sense of smell, like red dogs maybe? But, it's not like I wanted to proactively use it.

"Since that 'fire enchant' clearly didn't work... I don't think I have anything else that can—"

Ah, wait wait, wasn't I forgetting something really important?

"—Of course, Rotten Bog!"

In the previous fight against the Knight Mantis, I'd successfully reconstructed

Rem's body using the Rotten Bog. It was pretty effective too, result-wise.

There was also a point to make where Rem was doing her very best but... could this mean, maybe I could combine curses?

In the first place, Rotten Bog doesn't corrode my body nor does it degrade the hairs from Blackhair Bind. That's why my signature combo was always using a tentacle to drag a monster into the swamp.

It feels like it was intentional, rather than a coincidence, that the effects didn't counteract each other. Well, the curses were originally from a god. And, since Ruinhilde-sama created them, it's like a game system where all my spells conveniently show a certain level of synergy.

Since Super Poison Rem's was a success, maybe I could develop even more compound curse magics. Alright, let's try that out immediately.

A compound curse magic of Blackhair Bind and Rotten Bog.

"Decay, within the corrupted red abyss — — Rotten Bog "

While experimenting, I'd been using the full chants for the curses. It feels like a long time since I'd done this, just like with this last one and Blackhair Bind.

By the way, I was feeling kind of off put about creating a bog inside the fairy square, so I created it at the exit outwards. The Rotten Bog that was laid down was quite good, it spanned the entire width of the passage outside.

Ok then, the real thing starts now. Magic is all about the image, I firmly imagined the magic that I wanted.

"Seal off the path of escape, entangle— —"

It was the correct aria for Blackhair Bind, but was it really alright using the same thing while combining it? Even if it was fine with Rem... Hm, won't get any errors without trials, let's change up the spell canto into what I'm imagining the end result as.

Don't underestimate the literature club. Thinking up magic incantations is right up the alley for those chuunibyou light novel authors.

"Twine into hairs, O rotten red, become thread which violates flesh and bone— —"

It happened the moment I finished my random ass image-cantation. They flew out of the Rotten Bog's acid as if they'd been waiting for the moment I called upon them.

"Oh! It's Blackhair Bind, but red!"

They rustled like tall grasses as these red colored Blackhair Bind tentacles were extending from the surface of the swamp. Each one of them had the muddy red texture just like how I imagined them, the Blackhair Bind had taken on the toxic characteristic of the Rotten Bog.

"Nice, let's try things out with you"

Having somewhat high expectations, I tossed one of the wooden knife substitutes towards it. While it drew an arc over the poisonous bog, I manipulated the red blackhair tentacles to grab it.

The moment when an ominous red hair tip touched the branch, there was sizzling, and the branch was cleanly sliced in half.

When the hairs actually grabbed onto the now halved piece of tree branch, the item started getting finely chopped before falling into the bog in small pieces.

"I-it's... a success..."

No, this went beyond just a "success".

"This is amazing, an offensive curse!"

Rotten Bog, by itself, was like a land mine since it stayed in place, but if I used this, I could have this once stagnant curse rise up and unleash its merciless acid on my enemies. It's no exaggeration to say that I'd finally gotten myself a curse that I've been waiting for all this time, one that can actually attack, actively at that.

"I did it, I finally did it!"

My tension skyrocketing, I wanted to grant my first ever original curse magic its own name.

"Hmm, alright, thou shalt now be called Acid Wire!"

Redhair Twine : Skin will burn if touched, Meat will rot when entangled, Even bone will melt lest it twines. Red hair manifesting deadly acid.

A name and explanation popped into my mind at the very next moment. Oh Ruinhilde-sama, must we not have western letters in these names, is that so...

There was that bit of interference from my deity, but anyway, like this, I managed to successfully create an all new curse.

Chapter 72: Shaman vs Goma

“——Soo, I guess it's time.”

A few new curses and a lot of practice later, I finally decided to depart from the Fairy Square. I'd done all I could here. Now, I'll be putting it all to practice.

“Alright! Let's go, Rem!”

“GAGAA!”

Spiritedly shouted Rem, whom I'd revamped with a whole lot of Knight Mantis parts.

Reborn from the soil of the fairy square, my blood, and anything I could scavenge from the mantis, a whole new Rem stood by my side.

First of, off with the previous spiky Armor Bear armor, a brand new elegant and streamlined green armor now covered her black skeleton.

But wait, there's more. Attached to her right wrist came a Knight Mantis' sickle. Tucked into the elbow when idle, Rem's new blade could spring out for battle and be wielded just like a sword! Pretty much like a mecha.

The sickle resized itself to be adapted for Rem's body, which is as tall (or short) as me. This way, Rem would be capable of reproducing the mantis' slashing ability.

This time's Rem, seemed to look more confident. The entire mantis' body went into Rem's reconstruction, including the monster's core. I felt that the mantis was slightly weaker than the armored bear, but strangely enough, its core is way larger.

While Rem was not as strong as Mei-chan, she was still much better than my poor excuse for spearwielding.

Most importantly though, with Rem around, I won't feel too lonely.

Otherwise, I might just go crazy after a while. If I was ever actually left for dead on an island, I'm pretty sure I'd end up making a volleyball into my friend...

Disaster scenarios aside, having Rem explore the dungeon with me, I felt

better, but still uneasy.

Rem acted as my vanguard, while I took the rear. This part of the dungeon was stone, so it was lit from above. No need for me to use the knife as a torch, but I still kept it on my waist, should the need arise to draw it at anytime.

“Please, just let there be skeletons or something, nothing stronger.”

I’d only ever practiced with unmoving wooden dummies. I was still a combat noob, I’d rather test those sweet new moves on small fries than get roflstomped by the likes of a Knight Mantis.

The more I walked, the more my confidence left me.

It felt like a lot of time had already passed.

My G-Shock said it’d only been an hour or so. During that time, I’ve gone through 2 similar large rooms, to finally get to a wide corridor, dotted with stone pillars here and there, and even a forest dome... No monsters in sight.

“Hey, maybe Souma-kun killed them all off.”

Following the compass was leading me the same way Souma-kun took coming to us. He got to the insect cave from the Cerberus boss’ room.

The dungeon has multiple routes for each level, and there might just be ways further down without transfer circles. The compass wasn’t currently leading me the one in the insect caves from before. I was following it through another path.

If I worry about how much time it’ll take, all I’m gonna get is a headache, since all the routes must be connected one way or another.

“GA!”

Right then, Rem stopped.

“... What is it?”

Nothing in sight. Looks like Rem could sense them from a distance.

“GAGA.”

“Follow you? Okay.”

We were going there anyway, so whatever. We were at a large curving

corridor. The wide passageway had thick columns at fixed intervals similar to temples.

Rem went first, and hid behind a column. I followed her. We heard signs of enemies nearby.

“This sounds like, Gomas.”

Their shouts still sound like gibberish to me, but they seem excited.

Is it a fight or a hunt? I moved closer...

“... They’re hunting down Ants.”

From the shadow of the column, I could see 10 Gomas encircling 3 Pawn Ants. The floor got a new paint job, with blood and corpses.

Three Gomas were down and one of the Pawn Ants had been skewered.

Neither camp noticed me peeping on their hot blooded battle.

“So even the small fry duke it out sometimes.”

It still seems surreal, but it wasn’t illogical.

In games, monsters and the demon lord’s armies were united to stick it to the hero sideways, and the human side could take a few pages out of their book. Not that that much work is put to breathe life into them anyway. They were, after all, mostly fodder for the hero to grow.

But this here was real life, and those monsters there were now living creatures. Gomas had their settlements, and Pawn Ants made their nests too. Neither would be too chummy seeing a different species around.

A bit of a solace in this shit hole, to think everything is not out to get you alone.

“This, is a chance.”

When 2 dogs are fighting over a bone, a third one will carry it away.

Gomas and Ants should have merely been slightly more reactive dummies, but stepping up to 10 gomas and 3 ants is just asking for trouble.

“Good, keep on killing each other.”

On the other hand, if I let them thin out each other's numbers, I could just rush at the remnants and trample them. The gomas are numerous, but they're individually weak and poorly equipped. Some of them were even waving around unlit torches.

That being said, although they were still small fries, the ants did possess huge claws and mandibles filled with a strength befitting insect type monsters.

The disparity in fighting force is obvious. But no matter who gets the short end of the stick, most of them will be dead, or dead tired if lucky.

So, I watch on... 15 minutes of fighting later, it was over.

"Gruooohhh, Graaaggghhh!!"

"Nbaaa, Nbaaaa!"

The Gomas won. The individual fighting power disparity couldn't offset the difference of numbers, leading to a slaughter of the Ants

That being said, the Gomas still had a run for their money, with only 6 survivors. One was mortally wounded, 3 moderately injured, and only 2 were unhurt.

"Geba! Gooza, Juba!"

The survivors revel in their victory. Or at least, those that still could, the gravely injured one had drawn its last breath.

"Alright, Rem... let's go finish the job."

No one was watching their surroundings as they looted the corpses off their materials, still rejoicing.

Total noobs. I wonder how did they survive in here? Of course, we're crashing their party. Free kill, I guess.

"Entwine its escape, with weaving hair—"

Concentrate. I'd already simulated how this'll play out. But there were still 5 of them. If I fuck up, no matter how weak and stupid they are, they can totally pwn us with zerg tactics.

I gotta run them through quickly, quietly, and accurately.

“Twine into hairs, O rotten red, become thread which violates flesh and bone——”

I was chanting 2 curses simultaneously, but that was only feasible because they both stemmed from the same origin.

In my right hand was the all too familiar blackhair tentacle holding the red knife and acting as the main weapon.

In my left hand, to use with my new offensive curse, I was clutching a stone.

“—— Blackhair Bind, Redhair Twine.”

As the two curses came out from the bloodseal, they came together to form one single braid—— no, they were already knitting themselves into a rope.

As for the way Blackhair Bind knit itself into a rope, I had already wanted to improve on that since a while ago. Although the way they were braided into before had enough performance for a passing mark, I thought that they'd be sturdier if they were braided into a more rope-like form.

Apart from any other small improvements, I had to first understand the structure and process of the braiding method, it was tedious so I had postponed any experiments. I just couldn't make time for it with the others around.

That's why, when I started soloing, I had more than enough time to experiment and improve the Blackhair Bind. Although I had no genuine rope to use as reference, I used shoelaces and other rope-like objects that I got from my spoils and used them. It was a very cumbersome and tedious process, it also took up more time than what I had originally thought it would.

Well because of that, I had been able to create a sturdy makeshift rope, and with the Red Knife this new and improved Blackhair Bind had turned into a flame-tipped tentacle.

The rope improvement also applied to the Redhair Twine.

The acidic properties of the Rotten Bog are also applied without the need to put down a bog, it was automatically applied from the moment it was cast out from the bloodseal since the venomous property of the bog originated from my Black Bloodline in the first place.

Because it is acidic, I can't attach any weapons on it like with the Blackhair Bind. The hilt would melt, and it'd quickly deteriorate the weapon, so for now anyways, I can only let the blackhairs equip any weapons.

Well since the redhairs were basically weapons themselves, I can get by with just waving them around but... For me, I felt it was more reassuring if they had something attached to the tips.

So I used stones that wouldn't melt inside the poison of the swamp. The image is somewhat like a YoYo. By the way, back in elementary school, there was a time when everyone all had the YoYo-fever, and we all constantly played with them all the time. I was pretty good at it too, if I do say so myself.

Of course I never dreamed I'd be using my super fancy YoYo moves like this. This dual-wielding style of using the Blackhair Bind and the Redhair Twine was somewhat like using two YoYos at the same time back in the good old days.

So, one had a blade attached to it, while the other, a stone, each of them were currently flying towards the back of the Goma. There were aimed at a healthy goma. I'm not gonna overextend so I'll be focusing down on one of them.

"GII!?"

Bullseye. The red knife penetrated deeply into the center of its back, while the red hair wrapped around its neck. Both tentacles were attached to my hands so I got that positive feedback.

"GIAAAAAA!"

The embedded red knife released its flames using its ignition ability. As I roasted its flesh, I pushed the blade even further into its body.

At the same time, I tightened the red hairs wrapped around its neck. The bloody tentacles soon demonstrated its acidic properties, dissolving the thin neck of the goma. With a sickening sound, the flesh started dissolving.

"Gobura!"

"Zebuu, Dagouba!"

When their companion raised its scream, of course, the other gomas would

be alerted to the abnormal situation. When they traced back the origin of the tentacles attacking their friend, I was of course at the other end.

Was this enough? No, I had already dealt a fatal blow to it, so the rest will do itself.

The Goma started to crazily wield its weapon and tried to cut the tentacles. I pulled on them quickly and they immediately returned to my hands. The ambushed goma fell down on the spot and started convulsing, it appears that it won't be getting up anymore.

Well, considering that I had stabbed my knife into its back, melted down its neck, it had already lost all its fighting potential.

I didn't have time to pay any attention to that half-dead thing. I still had another four gomas to deal with. They had caught sight of me and started raising their battle cries, they seemed to be ready to charge at anytime. Still, the flow of the battle was still on my side thanks to the ambush.

"Spread out, Rotten Bog."

As soon as the red knife came back, I dropped down the Redhair Twine in my left hand and a Rotten Bog spread out with it as the source.

Actually, if I put my blood on a stone and threw it, it was possible to use the stone as the source. Even with the stone stuck to the redhairs. Of course, I had already tested these ideas with the Rotten Bog, so it was possible.

I exerted myself to spread the swamp to both ends of the corridor, blocking the way completely. I used it as a barricade.

"Next, is you!"

At the same time when the red hair returned to my left hand, I shot out the red knife tipped black hair. I aimed at the goma running at the forefront. I'll start with the ones that are closer.

"Damun!"

"It parried!?"

I didn't do any fancy movements, so it may have predicted the trajectory? The Goma had waved the knife in its hand, and deflected the red knife.

Dammit, what's that Goma being all cheeky for?

It wasn't the time to be cursing. Since it was blocked, there was a slight need to adjust my battle plan. At this rate, I'll be surrounded by the others. Even if they're just Gomas, if they had the guts, it might even be possible for them to run past the swamp with will power.

"Tsk."

I attacked with the red knife again and again, restraining the knife wielding Goma. While it stopped in its tracks, the other 3 kept on closing in.

This was getting bad, the distance had been shortened. Shit, they're getting closer. Calm down, don't panic. It's alright, I had more ways to do this.

Before I attacked again with the Redhair Twine, I launch a different curse.

"Wind 'em up, Spiderweave Wind."

This isn't any new magic, it was just a derived curse from the Blackhair Bind that I created. The effect was pretty simple, by weaving the black rope tentacles into the shape of a spiderweb, it could become a big net that could fly towards an enemy and entangle them.

Since I had a thread-like skill, I'd be pretty stupid if I didn't try to weave it into a net. It was a brilliant and obvious idea, but in truth, this it actually came to me when I first saw some cobwebs by the side of the path.

That's why after I finished developing the rope weaving technique, I went forward to try and create a net. At first, I practiced so I could get it done in an instant, but because the structure was much more complicated, it was difficult to shoot the 3rd and 4th time. Right now, 2 webs are my limit. Also the speed of the launched web is dependent on how hard I can throw it, so it wasn't exactly fast either.

However, since the origin of the skill is from Blackhair Bind, that meant it also comes with the advantage of being able to be launched out from any visible shadow that enters into my sight.

"NOBAA!?"

From the shadows of the columns, I released the Spiderweave Wind. Because

it flew from a blindspot, the Goma was caught unprepared and was entangle in the black web.

I had targeted the Goma with the spear. The other two are equipped with a torch and a rusty sword respectively, and I figured that it would be easy for those two to escape, hence, I intentionally targeted the one with the spear since it'd be much harder for it to deal with the net with a polearm weapon.

As expected, the spear-wielding Goma was rolling around the ground, frantically trying to extricate itself from the blackhair web entangling its body. Idiot, using your hands is even more useless.

The spear Goma had been temporarily neutralized. The torch goma and the rusty sword goma were steadily closing the distance. Also, the knife goma had started to run again, trying to catch up to the others.

“I’ll get you this time!”

I waited for the red knife to return, so as to succeed in the next strike, just like earlier, I shot out the twin tentacles of black and red.

The target was the sword goma who had reached the Rotten Bog. Right in front of the swamp, it seemed to ponder on what to do next, since the swamp clearly had a shifty feel to it. It was the perfect chance.

“GUGYAAAA!!”

Perfect, the red knife had hit its torso, the red hair had wrapped around its body and was corroding it with acid.

One, two, three, that seems to be enough.

After counting to three, I immediately release the sword goma. Thanks to the shallow stab and the fact that I didn’t strangle it, the sword goma still had enough strength to withstand the pain. If I continued my attack for another 3 seconds, it may have been able to receive a fatal wound, but for now it’s enough to just disable it. The finishing strike can wait for later.

“Next is — — ”

During the time when I was dealing with the sword goma, the torch Goma had enough time to make a running jump to try and cross over the swamp.

“I’ve already anticipated that—— Blackhair Bind ”

From the center of the poisonous bog, black hair tentacles popped out, ensnaring the stupid goma.

“NGOOOO!?”

Its ankle was caught while it was in the air, it was pulled down straight into the poisonous bog. It was thrashing around on the surface of the bog, raising cries of misery and agony. However, no need to worry, once your whole body’s been immersed fully into my Rotten Bog, you won’t feel anymore pain, you won’t feel anything really.

“UGOOOOOOOOOOO!”

With that scream that scraped at my ears, I noticed it.

“Damn, it jumped over!?”

The knife goma that came a bit late mercilessly used the one that was drowning in the bog as a stepping stone and crossed over the Rotten Bog effortlessly.

“GARU, DAGOVA!”

The distance that separated us was less than 3 meters. The knife goma who had landed lightly, pulled out another knife from its waist and changed into a dual-wielding style.

Meanwhile, the red knife and red hair were already coming back to my hands.

“Heh, a battle between 2 dual-wielders, huh...”

Right now, facing against this primitive creature that I had no way of communicating with, it kind of felt like we understood each other. The knife goma grinned and sneered while looking confident.

So, I also laughed.

“PUGYAA”

I pointed my finger and sneered at it. It was inevitable. I mean, it was so confident wielding its knives at me, thinking that it would kill me easily, unaware of the danger coming at it from behind.

“BUGYAAAAA!”

It screamed, and from the back of the knife goma, blood splattered. The goma fell forward with a stupid expression on its face that practically said, ‘Eh, seriously? Are you actually kidding me?’

“Good job, Rem!”

“GAA!”

What stabbed the knife goma was, of course, Rem, who was equipped with the Knight Mantis’ Sickle. She had been hidden by a column beside me.

Even if your role is vanguard, it doesn’t mean you have to reveal yourself to the enemy from the beginning. If an enemy approaches me by jumping over the Rotten Bog, that enemy will be focused on me so I just needed to flank it with Rem.

My first attack was a surprise attack and Rem’s was too. Like that, I was able to swiftly take out two. The problem was the remaining 3. So after the torch goma fell into the bog, it was game, set, and match.

“Phew, I’m glad it turned out alright...”

Break time.

As I expected, the battle went on almost according to how I planned it out and in the end I was able to annihilate the enemies. You could call it a success.

“But, there are many things to reflect on.”

Even though this time’s battle went well, my psyche during battle, wasn’t up to my expectations. Especially in that moment when the knife goma deflected my red knife.

Also, if I lacked even a little bit of my calm, I may have lost that battle. Or maybe, with the additional loss of Rem, it would have been a narrow victory.

“As expected, solo battles are tough...”

No, let’s think optimistically. It was inevitable since I was going solo, let’s just celebrate this brilliant victory and try to go through the next battle with confidence.

“Alrighty, now we collect the loot!”

Chapter 73: Poison Marsh

“— Hehe, great haul today.”

Once I was done sending the rest of the half-dead Gomas into the afterlife, I went and started looting through their stuff. Of course, I set Rem to guard the rear since I didn't want any surprises.

Let's have a look see here,

Jagged Knife: This knife has no rust, but the edges are very jagged. One of the Gomas were using 2 so I got them both.

Goma's Spear: A short spear that just screams shoddy. It's basically a tree branch with a claw from some large monster tied on.

Rusty Sword: A rusty sword. Awful quality.

Torch: A torch with a long handle. No, it's not lit.

Bone Club: A hard club fashioned out of some monster's bone.

Stone Adze: An adze like those from the stone age. It's made from the same stuff as the stone walls and ground.

The above were all I could salvage in terms of weaponry. I know it all may seem like junk compared to the Upgraded stuff Takanashi-san makes, but it was better than nothing.

“Right, so the only useful ones are the knife and sword... and maybe the spear.”

I didn't need the other 3. It's not like I couldn't make use of them, just that they'd be a chore to carry.

For me personally, the other loot from the Gomas were a lot more valuable than the weapons.

Torch Oil: The oil used to light a torch. Looks like they put it on a piece of cloth before setting it on fire.

Goma Drug: This shit fucks you up. I'm ready to use it on myself if push comes

to shove.

Goma Booze: Something that the knife wielding Goma carried in a small gourd. It reeks of alcohol, so I'm calling it booze. Was it used as disinfectant? Not a chance.

Rock Salt: I just eat it hoping it gives me my daily minerals. This is the all-purpose dungeon salt you can put on snake meat and Shrimpworms alike.

Redshroom: This fella here saved me in my first encounter with an Armorbear. Never thought I'd find Gomas carrying them.

Plumshroom: Now this is a first, it's a purple mushroom. It looks dangerous as fuck, but it turns out that it's not actually poisonous...

Goma's Leather Knapsack: Also from the Knife Goma, it's a bag made of animal hide. It's dirty like everything else they have, but practical nonetheless.

Goma's Leather Satchel: A different sort of leather bag, this one's from the Goma that got done in by a Pawn Ant. It's also dirty like everything else they have, but practical nonetheless.

And that's everything.

The two bags will be super useful, and I could make Rem carry them too. The Redshroom, Plumshroom and *etc.* will go inside them. With additional bags, I could now carry a lot more stuff since my old school bag had been always packed full as of late.

"Since I'm here, might as well power up Rem too."

I mean, do I not have 3 fresh Pawn Ant corpses just ripe for the picking? These were all the ones the Gomas had generously killed before I ambushed them. Ant parts weren't as good as Mantis parts but Rem can get just a little stronger if I do add them. Though that doesn't mean I'm also adding the Gomas, not at all. I'd become able to tell by intuition what worked and what didn't in terms of making Rem stronger. And Gomas simply didn't at this point.

"Rise from chaos, bind in foul blood, stand on stained earth—Vile Mud Doll"

Let's just see what happens with 3 whole Ant bodies...

“Wow, pretty damn good!”

Rem dissolved into the chaotic magic circle thing along with all the Ants, and when she came back out, I could see visible change.

She still had the basic Mantis shell armor, but now, the places where the green armor was missing were reinforced with black Pawn Ant shell armor. Now, the only visible part of the original skeleton body was the skull. Rem’s body now looked like it was in full plate armor.

“GAGA!”

And the Mud Doll herself was also happy.

Ok then, no point in hanging around here anymore. It’d be great if I could just get going to the next Square already.

“—— Arff!”

I could hear a dog’s barking from further away in the passage.

“Oh, no, that’s not a dog...”

I recognized this kind of bark. But before I could get my thoughts in order, they’d already arrived.

“Arf!”

“Arr arff!”

This annoying barking was not from the common four legged dog, but from a particular kind of two legged lizard.

“Goars!?”

I hadn’t seen these dinosaur monsters in a while actually.

With their large blocky heads and maws lined with razor-sharp teeth, a total of three, four, five... Fuck me, there were a whole seven of them.

“Open, Rotten Bog!”

They were all running at me at full speed, and I plastered the path in front of me with bog acid almost reflexively.

“Arrrf, gaarr!!”

I'd seen them do this before too. The Goars had an acute sense of smell and so instantly realized that stepping into the bog was a bad idea. One even cried out in disgust as if from the awful smell or something.

Alright, so before they think about jumping over to this side, I'll make my attack.

"——Redhair Twine!"

I summoned up the redhair tentacles from inside the bog and lashed them at the nearest Goar.

"Orf, gyauunn!"

The Goar's hard gray skin sizzled as the tentacles twined around it... but with a forced shake of its body, the monster tore apart the acidic bindings.

"Shit, that didn't work, alright, run!"

"GA!!"

I couldn't win this one, and having decided so, I turned 180 degrees and made a break for it.

Redhair Twine was going to me useless on them. With their stony skin, I don't think the Red Knife would fare much better either.

The only way I knew to beat a Goar was to place it in my bog and bind it down for a while. That's what I ended up doing last time when one of them got past Mei-chan. I'm saying that I needed that much time and effort to take care of just one.

Even taking on 2 simultaneously was impossible, let alone 7.

"Arf Arf!"

The one that I hit with Redhair and two others looked like they were getting ready to jump the bog. Meanwhile the 4 others had started eating the dead Gomas, and weren't focused on me. In practical terms, I had to take on 3 of them.

"Grab 'em! Blackhair Bind!"

Like I'd done before, I used my blackhair tentacles to grab the Goar midair as

it was jumping over that bog. It landed with a splash and a coarse sizzle. One down, right in the middle of the bog.

But I had two more I needed to deal with.

“ Spiderweave Wind!”

Aiming for the moment when they landed, I shot two sticky spiderwebs at the 2 lizards. I summoned these webs from a shadow of a pillar close to them, like I’d done for the Gomas.

“Now’s our chance, Rem! Run for it!”

This was all I could do in terms of stalling. I simply didn’t have the means to practically damage them through their tough hides, if I did, I’d have used them now that they were caught in my various bindings.

The Goma stuck in the bog should need just a little more thrashing around before all the blackhairs came loose, and the two stuck in Spiderweave Wind should get out even earlier.

I needed to use this little bit of time to the fullest, either run far enough to lose them, or find a place that can hide me.

“Shit shit, why is being a Shaman so damn shit!”

Just when I thought I had my first big win, out comes a tonne of monsters as if to mess with me. But, enough thumb-sucking, I just needed to run!

“Haah... haah... t-that was not fun...”

With a stroke of luck, I chanced on a crack in the wall large enough to barely let me in, and so managed to lose my pursuers.

I was relieved, and yet, knew that this sort of thing was going to happen over and over from now on. I needed running-away Skills more than offensive ones.

“Now that’s strange, the compass isn’t pointing the same way anymore.”

I was focused running for my life, so of course I hadn’t had time to check the compass. I could try going back to the crack in the wall, but the Goars might be waiting for me. Plus, I didn’t actually remember the way back anyway with how desperate I was.

“Let’s just hope this direction works too...”

I trusted the compass, and went for it.

The stone passage sometimes got wider and sometimes narrow, and I simply kept walking.

“Oh, a Skeleton.”

I met Skeletons a few times too. But Skeletons, Red Dogs and Zombies weren’t that big an issue. They’d usually come in groups of two or three, at most four, which I was greatly thankful for.

As for the way I took care of them, I used Redhair Twine, my only active damage curse, along with Rem. Yup, this was the appropriate difficulty for me.

That’s not to say I underestimated these small-fry, cause I totally didn’t. These were the limited types of enemies that I could handle solo. I was going to make full use of them for combat practice.

And so I continued on my new path, getting some fighting experience but not much else.

That said, fighting was still exercise, it was pretty tiring. Just walking on and on was tiring me out too.

I seriously needed a Fairy Square right around now. But instead, I got something unexpected.

“... Huh? The walls here, they look kind of purple.”

All of a sudden, I realized that the stone walls around me had taken on a faint purple tint. My guess is that it’d been getting more colored gradually, and now was when I finally noticed.

“I, I can only hope this thing isn’t broken.”

At some point when I was being chased around by the Goars, the compass in my notebook had started pointing in a completely different direction. And that was the direction I’d been following for a while now.

This just gave me a bad feeling. Changes in the dungeon’s scenery meant that there will be new types of monsters. And I doubt they’d be kind enough to be

weaker than Skeletons.

There was a good chance that there'd be Mantis class powerhouses in this new place too.

"No other choice though..."

I had no choice but to head deeper in if I ever hoped to meet Mei-chan again. And at this point, going backwards wasn't an option either.

Screwing up my courage, I only kept walking forward through the, now slightly purple, stone passage.

And soon after, the scene changed even more drastically.

"What the actual hell is going on with this place?"

The walls were now completely dyed purple, making the area look almost toxic. That wasn't all, now, there were traces of deep purple tree root like vines running all over the walls. The creepy looking plant life continued further in.

Purple Roots: Very poisonous. They come from normal trees.

I concentrated on them for a bit, and Intuition Pharmacy gave me some details.

These roots coming from normal trees most likely means that the soil they grew into was saturated with poison which affected the roots too.

"So it's a poison zone from here... Won't I get, like, poisoned?"

I mean, it was a valid concern. But I didn't feel like trying to find another route this far in... yeah, let's try heading further in.

But the moment I feel anything off, I'm hightailing it out of here.

"... Which doesn't seem to be happening."

As I went further, the volume of poison roots increased, now fully covering the stone walls. Even the floor I was walking on had turned to mostly root and I had to watch my step around them.

And after a while, when even walking was becoming a tasking effort, the passage finally ended.

“Huh. It’s a lot like— —”

I’d come to a place very similar to a forest dome. But there was none of that abundance of nature. All the trees were leafless, withered, and had gone white. The number of trees were far more scarce than in a forest, the ground was muddy, and the place was dotted with some weeds here and there.

The place seemed absolutely deadly, and I had a good name for it too.

“— — It’s a poison marsh alright.”

This whole zone seemed to love the color purple with how much of it everything here was. And it wasn’t just the color that made me think the place was toxic. I could see purple liquid bubbling out of places like lava.

It was like they took an area straight out of an RPG game. I mean, yeah the whole dungeon is like that, but did we really need to recreate a poison zone too?

I could almost feel like there was a purple skull icon above my head, indicating a poisoned status that slowly drained my HP to 0.

No, that hadn’t actually happened, at least not yet. I didn’t feel any pain, nor had coughed up blood. So, since I had seemingly no problem breathing the air here, I decided to scout around.

But really, this place still didn’t sit right with me. It didn’t cause any negative effects on my body but it made me sick to look at this scenery for too long.

After walking a little while longer, I was in luck.

“Shit, it’s actually a Fairy Square. I can’t believe there’s one here.”

It was like a cabin in the woods. Four stone walls and a roof made up a small building right in the middle on the dead forest. The entrance didn’t have a door but inside I found that it was a Fairy Square like anywhere else. A safe zone.

“Ok, I’ll make this my base while I’m here.”

With the compass and Fairy Square, I was now sure that this wasn’t just some meaningless area. This place had a Boss.

I couldn’t win against most Bosses, but I think I could handle it if it’s like that

big frog we'd once faced. If the Boss here looks manageable, I wanted to try my hand at beating it. Maybe this dungeon is just made in a way that you have to beat a Boss, *any* Boss, to get to the next level.

If it turns out that this whole dungeon was built with this concept, the magic compasses we use might not be showing us the correct way, but the way to the nearest Boss of the floor or to the nearest transfer circle guarded by said Boss.

Well, not like I can confirm any of that. I'd finally gotten to a Fairy Square so I wanted to get some well deserved rest. After that, I needed to explore this marshland zone.

"... I should get going."

I got some sleep, made lots of blueflower antidote paste, just procrastinated for a while more, and then finally got in the mood to go back out there. Rem had been standing guard at the entrance all this time, and she was raring for some action too.

The outside had a layer of fog now. And when I breathed it in, I started coughing violently, or not, I guess. Anyway, it wasn't so thick that I couldn't see where I was going, so I paid it no more attention. I still felt in no way poisoned even now, and it only seemed like the toxic marsh took on a deadlier atmosphere.

I explored this new and unknown place like I always did, fidgeting around in worry. And in that manner I found the first new monster of this zone, well not really.

"Ah! It's a Mandragora!"

It was the plant said to be the root of all medicine, I'd last seen these quite some time ago. But even now they're at the level of pretty much useless for me. Mainly because my concoctions just don't use this as an ingredient. I could only use it as extra parts for Rem. No really, I even tried putting it in with Ointment A and Antidote, but Intuition Pharmacy didn't indicate a change in effect at all.

"Well?"

"GAGA?"

I used the freshly picked Mandragora on Rem to see what happened but, at least on the outside, I couldn't spot any changes.

"Mmm, I guess you're movements are smoother now?"

It was just intuition telling me that. Well, I was all for it if there was a positive effect. I didn't care how minute, if it got me stronger, I'd use it.

"Oh, and here's one of those Plumshrooms."

The next thing I found was that new purple mushroom I'd salvaged off the Gomas recently. I discovered that these grew a lot around the white, dead trees.

"And Redshrooms too... maybe those Gomas got them from here."

Both Redshrooms and Plumshrooms seemed to grow a lot in this zone, and as long as I make this place my base, I won't run out of them at all. That being said, I still didn't have an actual use for them.

I sort of wanted to make a potent poison with the Redshroom that was strong enough to kill an Armorbear, but I didn't know how. In the first place, this poison had to be ingested while I already had Rotten Bog a Curse that dealt poison damage by simple touch, and also its derivative, Redhair Twine.

"Man, sometimes I wish I could just absorb stuff like Rem or——"

Or Yokomichi's Skill Eater, yeah. And as I was getting weirdly envious, I saw a plant that really stood out.

"Huh, it's what, a really big Plumshroom?"

That's kind of the only way I could describe the thing. It was a *big* mushroom. As big as me, in fact. Did mushrooms really get this big?

"Ski, skreeee..."

And they don't start screaming like that, right?

"No shit, it's a monster!?"

I quickly took a step back from the creature, and as if on cue, it started getting up. It made a *screee*-ing sound unlike any bird or insect I knew, and was now standing up on two legs.

It wasn't quite humanoid and looked like a badly made mushroom costume. Its legs were short, and it had something like hands, or fins or I don't know what. It's mushroom stalk was extra thick and bulky.

As for a name, let's call it a Matango, like the movie.

It started shaking, and its head that was like a purple colored Maitake mushroom started released a shit ton of some mysterious powder. Spores, if my guess is right. And if I breathed that in, I'd either froth at the mouth and die, or take a journey into a psychedelic wonderland.

"Shut up! I know just the way to take care of plant monsters like you!"

My gamer instincts tingling, I swiftly drew my Red Knife with a Blackhair tentacle and stabbed the Matango.

"Skreee, skreeeeeeee!!"

I jammed the firey blade inside and gouged left and right. This Matango's body was nowhere as tough as that of a Goar, and the red hot edge easily sliced up the fungus.

In no time at all the Matango's whole body was on fire, and the monster was reduced to an obnoxiously large roasted mushroom.

I was able to attack away from the range of its spores and defeated it rather easily.

"Wait, no, get away!"

Well, it wasn't quite done roasting yet, and was thrashing around in pain with its body engulfed in flames, which was getting a bit too close for comfort. Note to self: stay away longer next time.

"Phew, glad this thing wasn't too strong..."

I sighed in relief after the Matango died, its body now completely ash. Which was too bad, since I couldn't even use it for parts now.

But this did prove one thing: there were in fact new species of monster here.

I continued on my way, on alert for other new monsters that might appear. But nothing much happened for a while after that. The same bubbling pools of

poison here and there, the same white trees, mushrooms, Mandragoras and the occasional Matango. The same scenery.

Let's see, what else, I caught a snake that should be good for dinner, and panicked a bit when I found a giant leech on my leg like the time with the frog Boss, that's about it. Matangos were just weak. So long as I took care to avoid the spores, they were a bunch of clumsy pushovers. They were weaker than Skeletons and didn't come in groups either.

This place didn't seem so dangerous after all. No, that kind of thinking will get me killed. It was going to get serious soon. Why? Because I was soon about to reach the center of the poison marsh where I'd supposedly find the boss.

"Heck, even the ground is turning purple."

A clear change from just before. The muddy ground under my feet was taking on that same toxic color as if it was permeated with liquid from those poisonous pools. It was the type where you'd get damaged just by walking on it, but I seemed to be fine.

"And what's with all the Mandragoras?"

There were way too many Mandragoras here. It could be because this tainted earth was a good fertilizer for them, but there were just so many that I thought someone might be farming them here.

And beyond this Mandragora farm, I spotted a large, if not the largest pool of poison here.

The long body of water was actually in the shape of a crescent moon, and right beyond the pool, surrounded by that moat of deadly toxic lay the thing I was looking for. It was resting openly there like it owned the place.

"That's the Boss alright."

A giant lizard, no that rounded smooth body reminded me more of a Japanese giant salamander. It's figure was a lot like that somewhat protected species back on Earth.

But that isn't to say it was exactly like one. The beast was larger than an Orthus, clocking in at 5 meters long, and also, it's whole skin was an eerie off

white.

I don't know if this was just how it was or if it was an albino variant, and it didn't have red eyes so... No, it didn't have eyes at all.

I couldn't find anything resembling eyes on its smooth, round head and I'm sure they weren't just closed. Instead, it had linear slits on both sides like the gills of a lamprey.

This thing really creeped me out.

"Giant Salamander... No, let's call it Basilisk."

And then it, yawned, I think. It opened its gaping maw with a *skaa!!* and let out a thick purple haze. Instantly, Intuition Pharmacy reacted and told me that that gas was a poison more potent than even my Rotten Bog.

This Basilisk had an extremely deadly poison breath attack, of that I was now certain.

"A-and there goes my dream of taking it down solo..."

I wasn't even thinking about trying to attack it as a test run or something. I was absolutely terrified, making myself small behind a thick tree trunk, at best managing to spy on its actions from afar.

I couldn't get any closer and let it notice me. Actually, it might've noticed me already now that I thought about it. It didn't have eyes, which meant it didn't use sight in the first place. Meaning that it used its other senses to detect things.

Scent, for example. Which meant that me hiding like this served no purpose at all.

And since it wasn't trying to attack me or anything, I might as well go back and be on my way....

"But that's definitely the transfer circle over there."

I'd noticed it already. The Basilisk was actually resting right on top of a stone platform. And I could see the runed circle carved on it. Even the compass was pointing straight at the Basilisk so my guess was spot on.

That was my ticket out of here.

It took a lot of effort getting here. And if I went back, it was Goar territory. Could I really just walk away...?

“I’ll just watch it for now.”

Information was key. This wasn’t an enclosed room like the Orthus Boss, it was open world. I will lay low for now, observe every action of the Basilisk, like a wildlife photographer.

I will know the Basilisk, and only then will I decide on how to proceed. Whether I decide to fight or flee, I need to wait for now, with patience.

Chapter 74: All-New Harem Party

With the blue Lux Elemental guiding me, I had been running around in the dungeon in hopes of reuniting with the party I'd gotten separated from. I'd been anxious, worried, vexed even that even while I was on their trail, they must be going through tough battles one after another, and I ran with the utmost urgency—— And then, I'd found them.

The girls were in a large cavernous pit, surrounded on all sides by giant bug-type monsters, which I managed to quickly disperse with shots of my Cross Calibur, a Skill I was actually getting rather adept at using. I was so glad... so glad that the Goddess had given me the power of a Hero.

So glad that I'd made it in time, that I managed to save everyone —— But I soon learned that I was wrong.

“Ken, zaki, Asunaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

I'd taken the full brunt of the Berserker's fist on my right palm. That strength, that weight, even now, after Sakura had completely healed the wound, I still felt the occasional pangs of phantom pain. The rage from that one blow, and the pain that opened my eyes, taught me just how much I was missing. About the truth, about what happened.

After that, Class Rep filled me in.

How those two, Momokawa Kotarou and Futaba Meiko, were under attack by an Armorbear and were in dire straights. How the girls had admirably saved them. How, even if the two students who never really stood out in class, even if they were barely acquaintances, they strived to work together, to help each other... with more news of deaths, we needed to do this together, help each and every one we can, and escape this dungeon together.

Be it me, Sakura, Class Rep, or anyone else, they'd think so too. Wasn't that why they fought?

But that clearly wasn't all there was to it. I was made to understand that hard truth.

I believed in Sakura, and I trusted Class Rep. I believed in Asuna's strength of will, in Takanashi-san's kindness, and in Natsukawa-san's cheerfulness. I wanted to think that these bonds of trust would keep us strong.

"If I... if only I'd come back sooner..."

The constant battles, the harsh struggle for survival. I was loathe to admit that even those sweet, gentle and strong girls couldn't remain the same within all that stress.

The friction between Sakura and Momokawa. The duel between Asuna and Futaba-san.

Maybe it was simply inevitable that they couldn't trust Momokawa, what with him being the sole male among them. And Futaba-san considered him her savior. It wasn't hard to imagine her being furious once that happened.

But there was also the fact that that one incident had caused Sakura and Asuna to completely mistrust him.

I wanted to think that it wasn't any one person's fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. Yes, it wasn't supposed to be anyone's fault, but a crack had been already formed.

And it all happened under the stress for survival, when no one had the soundness of mind to attempt at healing that scar —

"If I just..."

And as those emotions festered to a boiling point, another tragedy had occurred, this one I had no idea how to handle.

And yet, we were not allowed to stop moving forward.

Asuna had pushed Momokawa off the transfer circle. Futaba-san had flown into a rage. And Class Rep risked it all to calm her down.

Even with this fatal scar that led to the worst possible turn of events, we still needed to cooperate in order to get out of this dungeon. Thanks to Class Rep's efforts, Futaba-san had been convinced to go together with us.

And so we advanced deeper into the dungeon.

We were currently in a familiar type zone, stone ruins, and no new strong monsters had appeared. Skeleton Troopers in the passages and packs of Red Dogs in the forest domes. All of which we could easily manage.

We knew how to fight these monsters, and were able to safely dispatch them. But it was so silent. Everyone only spoke when necessary but otherwise went about killing the monsters without much dialog.

Futaba-san was incredibly strong, and Asuna, who I was worried was suffering from psychological duress, had no issues in dealing with monsters. Sakura and Class Rep provided great magic support, while Natsukawa-san was adeptly dealing with any possible surprises. Even Takanashi-san who couldn't fight was holding strong. As for me, I tried to fight harder than anyone, frustrated with how I didn't want to lose anyone else, and practically venting it onto the monsters.

No, this wasn't enough. Just feelings won't be enough to save everyone. We'd now become, with the addition of Futaba-san, a party of 7. We were one party but we were far from being *one*.

It was easier now. But as we advanced in this state, as the zones got more difficult, as the Bosses got even deadlier, could we really overcome everything as we were? — The future didn't look good, I was angry at my own powerlessness, and the rush to get stronger was boiling over.

"Quite the long face you have there, Yuuto-kun."

"Oh, Class Rep..."

We had gone past 2 more Fairy Squares, and were now taking a break inside the third.

This Fairy Square marked the end of the ruins area as the the other side led to earthen ground and an actual sky above. This Fairy Square seemed to have been constructed at the summit of a small mountain and I was sitting right outside, gazing blankly at the scarlet twilight sky and the deep jungle expanding out into the horizon.

"I'm sure you know why..." I continued, "I couldn't do anything. I know we can't keep going like this, but I just don't know what to do."

“I know, and it’s fine, this is one of those things where you can’t do anything even if you want to. We all just need time.”

“Still,” I tried to argue.

“I think, that it’s starting to get better, just a little. Well, not better, but back to normal I mean.”

“Y-you think so?”

“Yes... and it’s thanks to Futaba-san. I thought she hated all of us a lot more with how she was, but that girl has been nothing but cooperative.”

She was right. Futaba-san didn’t like us, to the point where it wouldn’t be strange if she got into constant arguments. Asuna’s actions had dire repercussions for Momokawa, but at the end of it all, we’d dealt no punishment to her at all. We could try explaining it all we wanted, about how this wasn’t the time to be fighting amongst ourselves, or how Asuna was an important vanguard for the party, but that wouldn’t erase the raging hate that Futaba-san felt towards my childhood friend.

And yet, despite all that, Futaba-san was acting as if she wasn’t bothered by it at all. She had almost no complaints and had been extremely cooperative with the party. She was not only a stronger vanguard than Asuna, she even took it upon herself to become the party’s cook.

Her snake roast was amazing. And currently, she’d gotten her hands on a lot of these Shrimpworm bugs, and was excited over having them freshly grilled. While Natsukawa-san, who was not too keen about suddenly being picked as assistant chef, was helping out with tears in her eyes.

“Honestly, you wouldn’t believe how relieved I am.”

“You don’t need to feel so responsible, Class Rep.”

“Oh yeah, then how about you help me out next time and calm everyone down instead?”

“Urk... sorry...”

Back then, I hadn’t even had everything explained to me, so I was completely at a loss as to why everything was happening. I had no way of helping Class Rep

negotiate with Futaba-san, and could only manage to physically stop her from hurting Asuna.

“I can only hope that there won’t be a next time. If we made her that mad again, I don’t think we could stop it.”

“I don’t want to imagine having to fight each other...”

“Still, just keep this in mind, if we come to find out that Momokawa-kun died after all... well, I’m just saying be prepared for the worst.”

“—!? Hey, don’t tell me——”

“I’m just saying it’s a possibility. It’s one of the worst case scenarios. Yuuto-kun, I just want you to think about it.”

Having said what she needed to say, Class Rep turned her back to me.

“Also, try not to be that depressed in front of the rest of them. You don’t have to mean it, but just show a bit more energy. If you do that, then the rest of them will try to be optimistic too.”

“... Sure, I can do that.”

“And about Asuna, be there for her, alright? I’ll talk to Sakura on my end.”

It hurt a little to hear that last part, because I knew how important it was. I decided to sit here a while longer.

“Nii-san, the dinner’s ready.”

And I’d continued to keep to myself until Sakura called me in. I hadn’t found my answer, and the thoughts and worries only kept going in circles in my head—— but Class Rep told me to try, so I tried putting on a smile, at least for them.

Just the act of smiling more is said to improve one’s mood. If I looked depressed, I’d just keep getting more depressed.

“Uh, guys... do I really have to eat this?”

But as if trying hard to turn that smile upside down, there was now this big, piping hot caterpillar-like bug served in front of me. This must be that Shrimpworm I’d been hearing so much about. Sure it had that juicy red and

white striped pattern that was a lot like shrimp, but overall, it still looked the shape of a beetle larva.

“These Shrimpworms are quite big, aren’t they? They look delicious.”

“That basin we found still has a lot left. I’ll be sure to go catch more later.”

Class Rep and Futaba-san were all smiles as they chatted while prodding the grilled worms with their chopsticks.

“Check it out! I used my new magic to make soy sauce, and even mayonnaise!” chirped Takanashi-san.

“I’m still amazed by how much it can do, that replication magic of yours,” Sakura chimed in.

Just the other day, Takanashi-san had gotten a new Skill, Lesser Replicate. She’d used this new Sage magic to make copies of the small packets of soy sauce and mayonnaise she had in her lunch box.

This Replicate magic was, as Sakura said, really amazing in how it can make exact copies of things... But as it stood currently, with Lesser Replicate, she could only do small items. It also required varied amounts of mana depending on the thing being replicated, and sometimes even required supplementary ingredients.

It was a great Skill as a concept, but it wasn’t quite useful for bolstering our strength like her Upgrades did. But it instead proved to be extraordinary in terms of diversifying our food, since I didn’t think we would come across soy sauce or mayo any time soon in this world.

Takanashi-san was grinning ear to ear as she caked mayo all over her Shrimpworm, while Sakura on the other hand only slightly added soy sauce on hers. None of them had any qualms about eating this it seemed.

“It’s very good. The little bit of seasoning makes a lot of difference.”

Even Asuna, whom I was worried sick over, had on a small smile as she chewed on the literal grub.

“... Seriously, how are they all fine?”

It didn’t make sense to me how all these girls were so naturally dining on

worms of all things. And it wasn't like they were all fine with being around live insects from the beginning. I know that Sakura, for instance, wasn't fond of bugs at all, while Takanashi-san used to run screaming if a slightly big one ever came up to her.

I myself didn't have a problem swatting away cockroaches and the like, and thanks to the deep mountain training with my grandfather, I could handle eating snakes and other non-conventional food. I don't mean to brag, but I do have a few more survival skills than your average high school guy...

"Souma-kun~, why are you not eating~?"

"Wait, hold on, Natsukawa-san!?"

I'd left my plate untouched as I watched, with a tinge of horror, how the girls were eating so nonchalantly, which was when, Natsukawa-san, with her sneaky Thief skills, had sneaked up close to me. Her eyes were scary.

"I, I was about to right now, don't worry about it."

"Oh really?"

"Yes really. And why are you glaring at me like that?"

"I just want you to *enjoy* these Shrimpworms that I worked so hard to peel, that's all~"

"Of course I will, I'll have them now, in fact."

Then I looked down. I could only see this thing is beetle larva.

Oh, no, I can't let it get to me. I need to move my chopsticks now, or else.

"Souma-kun~"

"Yes, I'm eating them! I'm eating them, alright!"

So, just, please, give me a second to get ready for this...

"Hey guys~, it looks like Souma-kun doesn't want to eat the nice Shrimpworms. Won't you help me convince him~?"

"EH!?"

As though my hesitation had spurred her into action, Natsukawa-san seemed

to see it as her duty to have me eat this one way or another. And she had no problem involving the rest of them too.

“That reminds me, this is going to be the first time Yuuto-kun eats the Shrimpworms, isn’t it?”

“That’s certainly true. Nii-san, please don’t worry, it may look like a worm, but the taste is oddly very shrimp-like I assure you.”

“Wait, Class Rep, Sakura, why are you two holding my arms?”

Exchanging a knowing look amongst each other, Sakura and Class Rep grabbed tightly on to my right and left arms respectively. Why are you doing this, let me go, I can eat by myself!

“Souma-kun, the Shrimpworm is so yummy, you just have to try it! With lots of mayonnaise!”

“You can’t keep eating only walnuts, this is for your own good. Eat.”

“I said I’ll eat! I promise, so you don’t need to force me alright!”

In addition, Takanashi-san and Asuna strongly recommended the Shrimpworms by each clutching on to my shoulders, further holding me in place.

“I think he should try it with just salt for the first time.”

“There you have it Souma-kun, say ahh!”

Futaba-san held up the plate with the fat grilled worm with a gentle smile, and Natsukawa-san grabbed it with a pair of chopsticks and brought it close to my face with an evil grin. The smell itself incited my appetite but the white jiggling meat so up close shoved my head back into thinking that this was indeed a worm that they were forcing on to me.

Nope, can’t do it. I don’t have the courage or bravery to take a bite out of this thing. And here I thought I was a Hero.

“P-please, I, I’m not ready for this!”

“*Nihaha*, neither was I, now open wide!”

“No, wait, no, I’m not—— aaaaahhh!?”

Chapter 75: Basilisk Observation Report

I'd started preparing for a possible solo Basilisk subjugation, and for that I needed a way to safely observe it.

"This looks good enough."

The first of those preparations was stealth equipment. Basically, I'd made a ghillie suit.

I first took all the Goma rags I'd pilfered, and fashioned together an overcoat with the use of Blackhair threads. I then dipped this coat into one of the bubbling purple bogs and as I expected, the clothing was now died the same color. I added random bunches of weeds and mushrooms on top and done.

Still, the Basilisk didn't have eyes, and making this camouflage might have just been a huge waste of time, but I wanted to believe it wasn't. Well, at least I now got another use out of Blackhair bind: now I could make string with it. In string form, I could actually separate it from its shadow, or my body, and it'd last quite a while.

Depending on how I practice with this, I might be able to make my thicker and longer tentacle hairs last longer too.

Another new way I'd used Blackhair Bind was for climbing trees. This Curse had grown a lot from the noodley tentacles it made when I first got it. Now, my tentacles had the strength to hold down a thrashing Goar, so obviously they could lift up my less than 50 kg body.

And no, it wasn't like I was swinging tree to tree like Tarzan, but now I had the option of climbing up places and survey the area.

The camo suit and tree climbing practice took all of the first day.

And only thereafter did I start my focused observation on the Boss of this poisoned zone.

So anyway, since I'm still alive, I guess it's going well. The Basilisk didn't seem to notice me at all. I didn't know if it was just ignoring me or it actually hadn't detected my presence. And I didn't want to test the waters just yet because it

was still seriously scary, so I kept up my observation from afar.

And once I'd done that a few days, I learned 3 things.

Number 1: the Basilisk mainly eats Mandragoras.

In the morning, it gets up from its resting place, crosses over the crescent shaped moat and goes towards the Mandragora field just beyond. It then uses its short but thick front nails to dig out and eat the plant creatures. And it eats with gusto. So much gusto in fact that it made me want to eat one too.

Here I was thinking that if it ate that many, that fast, the field would be empty in no time... But the next day, I saw that the area that the Basilisk had grazed on had regrown its portion of Mandragora already. And that made me think. This whole spot must be a special area where it's made so that Mandragoras grew at an alarming rate. It might just be how the dungeon keeps the Basilisk in its spot, like with some kind of magic fertilizing device.

So this completely ruled out biding my time until it starved and weakened.

Alright, Number 2: It eats other monsters too.

This was something I saw when I was getting kind of sleepy while watching the big white thing laze around all day.

A group of Gomas had come, chasing after a Matango. I was so fucking glad I had my ghillie suit on, like holy shit. Gomas being here and collecting mushrooms meant that this zone was part of their hunting grounds too. And if they found me, I'd have one more problem to deal with.

The rowdy bunch of Gomas didn't notice me at all and made a lot of noise chasing down the running mushroom.

I guess they didn't want to breathe in the Matango's spores, which must've been poison or something after all, so they only did ranged attacks like throwing stones or torches or using their bow and arrows. Because of this slow method, they couldn't quite finish off the Matango and had made it to the banks of the crescent moat, Basilisk territory.

And when the Gomas stepped into its field of Mandragoras, the Basilisk made its move. Its large body was not the fastest, but it moved almost silently. It

waded into the crescent pool without making a sound, approached the new invaders quietly, like a preying alligator, and — —

“Boaahhhh!”

It raised its head from the bog and coated the annoying Gomas with its acidic breath. With a color closer to black than purple, this breath looked deadly, much more putrid than the gas it released when it yawned.

Bathed in the toxic smog, every one of the Gomas instantly started writhing in pain, flooding blood from their mouths, and then falling dead. Their black skin instantly began blistering, with red popping bubbles, and melted away.

The way I once saw Gomas eating a human was chilling, but this was terrifying in a whole other vector.

But I was used to death by now. I wasn't shocked to the point that I'd forget to analyze this attack.

“... So it can't melt clothes?”

The Gomas looked awful, I mean, they always did, but all these Gomas were just pulsing meat now. And yet, none of their clothing or weapons had sustained any damage. This didn't happen with my Rotten Bog. Which meant that the Basilisk's breath didn't melt inorganic things, or it didn't have a strong enough acid or reactive component to do it. It could be some kind of poison that only affected living things, or an acid that highly specialized in melting them.

Still, that shit is scary. The Gomas all died from taking in one breath, and, I only noticed it later but, the Matango had also died writhing around. The mushroom monster obviously didn't have blood and had become a withered husk.

“One shot of that and I'm dead.”

And I don't think holding my breath would help. This reminded me of that one movie with the terrorists using this kind of poison gas. What was it, VX gas or something?

Anyways, after its prey had died, the Basilisk waded out of the bog and ate it all up.

Finally, Number 3: the Basilisk's lifestyle.

This was something I could confirm only because I had Hirano-kun's watch, since inside the dungeon, there was no day and night, it was all lit up from above, all the time. And since I possessed this ability to measure time exactly, I was able to get a good estimate of the Basilisk's daily lifestyle.

The Basilisk ate its staple of Mandragoras in the morning. Only once. But if other monsters entered its territory while it wasn't asleep, it will hunt them down and eat them. I've observed it doing this twice, once with the previous incident with the Gomas and the Matango and another time with a lone Matango wandering around aimlessly.

It sleeps at night. It went to sleep right around sunset time, and didn't move at all until sunrise time. It didn't move much during the day either, but it still waddled around, sometimes raising its head in a yawn, so I knew it was awake. It kept completely still at night so I marked that down it as not awake.

This was the info I'd obtained over a 3 day stakeout. I had to suffer through a lot of boredom to get to this point, since the Boss was essentially like a NEET, it just lazed around all day. I even had to pull all-nighters so I could measure its sleep cycle.

I'd prefer to get more long term data on the monster, but I wasn't exactly killing time here. These three days of observation should give me a good enough estimate of the Basilisk's behavioral patterns.

Now then, let's address the main issue.

"I have no idea how to kill it."

I didn't have any attack strong enough to kill this thing.

There was the possibility that I could sneak up on it at 'night' time, but if it woke up, I'd be at a complete loss as to what to do, and, of my life. I'm dead if that destructive breath hits and I'm also dead if it kicks me with those clawed paws.

I'd have to prepare a stick or two of dynamite if I wanted to kill that mammoth of a creature in one go. Needless to say, I did not in fact have a method of manufacturing such a Nobel prize winning explosive. If Mei-chan was

here, I bet one solid blow to the head from her would do the job, but I had to think realistic, not miracles.

“So I can’t sneak up on it, then... Uhhh, maybe set a trap?”

I had to think like a caveman trying to hunt a mammoth. I can’t challenge it head on since that would be extremely stupid, but I could trap it, seal its movements, then keep attacking till it dies. I saw this historical documentary where there was a picture of cavemen who’d dug a pit where they dropped the mammoth and were all stabbing it with their spears.

“Can’t do that either. I’m just one person, and how the hell am I going to make a pit that big anyway.”

This was still a solo mission. I guess with Rem it made two of us, but still, I couldn’t see us two prodding away with a Goma’s spear doing much to the Basilisk.

And digging a pit that large wasn’t exactly a viable option. Even with shovels, I highly doubt I had the stamina or will power to build even a human sized pit, let alone one for a 5 meter long creature.

And let’s say I worked my ass off and did dig a Basilisk sized hole, and let’s also say that I somehow got it to fall in. With the type of body it has, I could easily see it just climb out like an oversized newt.

“I gotta think more outside the box. I’m a Shaman, and what’s a Shaman have...”

Right, Curses. No impressive finishing moves, no indomitable strength, and no lightning fast wits. What this high school otaku got from his patron God Ruinhilde was solely the power of Curses.

And so I had to work with what I had. I had to think up more and more ways to make use of these Curses.

“Okay,” I sighed, “looks like I’ll need to do a lot more experimenting.”

And once I went and decided on that, I figured I should just try out every little idea I had.

“Let’s start off with, Mud Doll.”

“GAGA?”

Oh, I didn’t mean you Rem.

I’m thinking of making a second one. Which reminds me, the last time I tried this, before that Orthus fight, I’d run out of mana mid way, and the ritual ended in failure. Currently, I could tell by intuition that I could handle having 2 at the same time without much effort, but I wanted to avoid collapsing from mana depletion if at all possible.

It didn’t have to be as strong as my current Mantis gear Rem, just making one that can wield a spear would help a lot with our DPS.

“The parts are, okay-ish.”

The mud base would be the stuff from this zone. The skeleton being a Skeleton since I didn’t have anything better. And, let’s just throw in some Mandragoras.

This should be enough for a trial run.

“Alright——”

I dropped blood from my bloodseal, and recited the full aria. Let’s see where this gets us...

“— — Hawa!?”

My eyes shot open. The first thing I saw was the familiar white ceiling of the Fairy Square.

“Don’t tell me I passed out again?”

“GA.”

Rem nodded, standing beside me and looking down. Come on, you gotta be kidding me.

I’d went and depleted my mana again.

“Tsk,” I clicked, “gone and wasted all that time.”

I honestly felt like I could do it with my current mana, but it seems I’d overestimated myself. And here I was, so excited to get double the Rems, why does my body have to be so weak all the time?

“GA, GA!”

“It’s okay Rem, I’m not that depressed.”

Rem was patting me on the shoulder which, I guess was her trying to be considerate. I mean, she didn’t have to do it that awkwardly, but, wait, that’s, There was another Rem.

No, this wasn’t the same one with the green Mantis parts, this new one was the familiar small, black skeleton type that I had a while ago.

“H-holy shit! It worked, it worked!!”

So apparently it took all my mana to make, but I now had an all new Vile Mud Doll.

“Awesome, now to name you——”

I was excited to name the new one, when I suddenly noticed, or should I say, kind of knew already? Anyway, because of the link I had with Rem, I understood something.

“— — Huh, so you’re Rem too?”

“GAGA.”

Rem and the second one both nodded. Like, simultaneously to the dot, as if Rem was controlling both bodies.

I don’t know if I should say that Rem had a personality, but she was still something like an AI that controlled a body. So I’d always thought that if I made a second one, then a different AI would take control of that body.

But Rem was in fact manipulating both these Mud Dolls. Two bodies with one mind. I couldn’t really imagine how it worked, but maybe it was easy for Rem as she was born from a Curse.

“Okay then,” I accepted, “so how’s the new body? Can you move it normally?”

“GAGAA!”

The Rems started shadowboxing to prove that there were indeed no issues. The original Mantis bladed Rem swung around her Mantis blades, while the

second one punched the air. Oh, it just made a kick too.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“GA!”

Rem appealed again, which for some reason, sounded to me like she was saying ‘You bet’cha!’ Must be my imagination.

Anyway, so no problems on the control front. Rem will be able to control both of her bodies without lag or confusion. She won’t get into problems in, say, moving both left arms at the same time.

What’s best of all was that both of them fighting together would not even be teamwork. With one mind, they could move perfectly in sync.

“And that makes Rem all the more powerful...”

And all bodies of Rem would be controlled by the sole Rem, making for precise and crisp movement. Oh boy, oh man, I’m getting excited! Is it finally time to unleash my Super Awesome Servant Army!?

“Beating that Basilisk, I, I might just be able to do it.”

Let’s just called the second Rem, #2.

Chapter 76: How to Draw a Hexagram

A success like this was a good starting point. I needed some time to recover my mana now, so to best make use of this free time, I took Rem and #2 with me to go and observe the Basilisk some more.

The Basilisk was in its usual spot, lazing around as always, while I was also only casually observing the beast. I still felt like a pro cameraman just waiting for that perfect shot.

As for today's events, no stupid Gomas had run into the Basilisk's territory, and neither were there any stray Matangos. The zone Boss only got up to have it's big breakfast of Mandragoras and didn't do much else.

But one new thing did happen.

"This, it's definitely the thing's skin."

Doing a once over on the Mandragora fields, I saw a white piece of skin just lying there. It had an area of around 30 cm squared. This was by no means something I'd caused, for example, by attacking the Basilisk when it least expected it and tearing off a piece of skin.

"So this Basilisk sheds too."

Meaning that this was naturally shed off skin. How the Basilisk, or any monster for that matter, was born in this dungeon was still an unknown for me, but I knew that this monster in particular needed to sleep and eat. It was a living being. It shedding its skin could be a sign of growth, and if not, it could just be a way to get rid of its old skin.

Incidentally, I had #2 go to the field and collect the skin.

"Mng, using it for Rem parts kinda seems... iffy."

With how small it was, I didn't think it could cover all of Rem with the skin. I'd expect that a few parts of her body would get some white skin patchwork at most, which would be less defensive and more ornamental. And frankly, we had no time to make fashion statements.

“Ah, wait, I’ve got just the right use for this.”

It was as if a lightbulb flicked on on top of my head. I’d spent the day resting and watching the Basilisk, so my mana had recovered enough to shoot a few Curses before going to bed.

“——Rotten Bog.”

I let loose a drop of blood and made a puddle sized bog. I then cut off a small piece of the Basilisk’s shed skin and laid it down on the acid puddle. Then I waited...

“Damn it, it... wait, it is, it’s melting. Yes!”

With this little experiment, I tested whether my Rotten Bog would really work on the Basilisk’s skin.

In games and fantasy, Basilisks that specialized in their acidic breath always had strong resistances for similar type attacks. It was like fighting a dragon with fire, I’d almost assumed that the Basilisk was immune to any and all poison.

But the only way I could even imagine defeating a creature so large was by using the Curse that had the most damage output: Rotten Bog. If my acidic swamp had an effect on it, I could finally start thinking up a plan of action.

“Damn, this might just actually possibly work.”

The Basilisk skin wasn’t showing any changes for the first few seconds in the puddle bog, but soon enough, I could see small bubbles forming on it, and gradually, the piece had started melting. Roughly estimating, I could see that it took more time to dissolve than Mantis shell, but it definitely wasn’t immune. Which was good, since if it’d been as tough as Armorbear shell, I might’ve just given up on this mission altogether.

Anyway, this basically meant that I could use Rotten Bog on it effectively. It could be that its meat, that is, the muscle under the skin, is even more resistant to acids, but I really didn’t want to imagine that possibility.

“Which leaves me with the problem of how I’m going to make a Basilisk sized Rotten Bog.”

The biggest one I could make now was just barely 4 meters long. The Basilisk

was at least 5 meters by my estimate and it had quite the girth too. I needed a way to make a Rotten Bog that could hold the massive creature with room to spare, somewhere in the neighborhood of 10 meters squared.

On that note, I had a few problems to deal with. Namely, mana, casting speed, and whether I had enough blood to make it work.

I mean, I could probably do it if I put my all into it, but killing the Basilisk would in no way end with simply laying down a bog. I'd have to hold it in place for a pretty long time, long enough for it to die.

In other words, I'd have to employ Blackhair Bind for a while after I was done setting the bog and luring the Basilisk into it. Which meant that I'd need to use more mana.

I had to make a huge Rotten Bog and then I had to maintain long and tough ropes of Blackhair Bind to restrain the Basilisk until it died. And with my current total mana reserves, such a feat was... yeah, impossible.

"I guess I'll need a way to increase my mana, or alternatively, find a way to use less mana for my Curses."

I kept mulling over what I needed to do as I slowly drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I decided on continuing my Curse experiments.

"Alright, I'll get myself a sacrifice!"

I call it the, 'Please, my Lord, Ruinhilde-sama, accept this sacrificial ritual and grant me one big awesome super Curse'-plan.

I'll be frank, I had no idea whether this whole sacrificial shindig was going to do anything, but I also didn't know if it'll do *something*, so I'd just try. I'd justify my actions on the fact that the spells in this world are highly dependent on the caster's image of it, and thus, me doing something so Shaman-like should get me results.

Since I already had to use parts and ingredients for Rem, I figured that a Shaman was the sort of Job that could make use of real world things in its other Curses too. So what I called a sacrifice would simply be another ingredient. Well, basically, it's just some guesswork on my part.

“That’s the plan, so let’s go and get them, Rem.”

“GAGAGA!”

Rem and #2 were raring to go, and the three of us then temporarily left the poison marsh zone and headed back into the ruins that led here.

“— — Wow, with the second Rem, I actually feel a lot more at ease. Thanks you two, you’re the best.”

“GAGAA!”

And after some time, we’d done what we set out to do. Here are the day’s pickings:

Goma Corpse: A freshly killed Goma corpse that I killed by wringing its neck, so there was no blood or other wounds. I have two of these and Rem and #2 carried them back to base, one each.

Matango Corpse: Found this one waddling around the Fairy Square so I grabbed it. I used my ranged knife tentacle attack and sent in Rem and #2 up close and personal as they were immune to whatever poison the Matango released. This walking mushroom was one of the easiest things for me to hunt.

Monster Blood: Blood I collected from Gomas and Red Dogs and the like while they were still alive. I’ve stored them inside the leather sacks the Gomas carried their water or booze in. I have around 2 liters.

Core Fragment: Really small shards of monster core that the small mobs sometimes had. Rem went and collected them for me.

I guess it wasn’t a proper sacrifice since I was using corpses, but all these gory ingredients gave off a good shaman-y feel.

“Let’s try with just the blood first.”

I started off the experiments with the ‘cheapest’ ingredients. The cores, no matter how small, were still raw crystallized mana. I was pretty sure they’d give me some boosts, so I was saving those for the actual fight.

I poured a cup’s worth of Goma blood on the ground, added a drop of my own blood, and invoked Rotten Bog.

“It’s bigger... but not by a large margin.”

From yesterday’s skin experiment, I remembered how big the bog was with 1 drop, so I could clearly tell that adding Goma blood slightly extended its breadth.

“But that’s alright. Now I *know* that it does something.”

If push comes to shove, I could very well collect a tub load of blood. Between Rem, #2, and I, we should be able to carry it all relatively fast.

“Time’s a wastin’.”

I redid the experiment with all sorts of combinations, and jotted down the results.

It felt strange to use my notebook as a notebook, and not as a magic compass. It also felt odd holding a pen after so long. I made a table with my gathered ingredients and noted down the effects gained with a mix of 2 ingredients. Once that was done, I increased the number of ingredients to 3, then 4, and repeated the combination experiments.

That said, my resources were limited and I couldn’t do anything massive. I carefully measured out the more potent ingredients to be as efficient as possible.

This work kept me busy for another 3 days. The time wasn’t only used on the doing of the experiments but also time for going out hunting for ingredients and time required to replenish my blood and mana.

“Kind of went overboard there... I need to start organizing.”

After a few days of hunting monsters, which were mostly Gomas by the way, the Fairy Square I was occupying had become littered with all manner of loot. Of course, I’d left the bodies and other raw stuff outside, but killing all those Gomas basically meant I ended up collecting a whole bunch of their equipment and items. At some point, I’d started thinking that I could find some use for literally *everything* they had, and now there were a bunch of dead, naked Gomas right outside my base.

But the experiments were going quite well. I’d gotten lots of little tools to use,

and eventually, I'd made a new discovery.

"This, I can use... this, magic circle."

Magic circle. It's something that's appeared a lot, be it for granting us our Jobs, the all-important compass, and even the somewhat useless texted updates.

What I had discovered was that I could use them in my Curses too.

"The effects change slightly depending on how I arrange the ingredients."

That's right, by just changing how I placed the sacrifice items on the circle, I could manipulate the Rotten Bog's size and depth.

"Circular ones are best."

The first magic circle we all had to draw in our notebooks was circular. I was sure that this shape would wield the best effect, even for my Curses. Just to be sure, I made sure to test with triangles and squares, but those didn't have as much effect as the circles.

I drew out these circles as precisely as possible, with blood, of course.

And drawing a perfect circle was easy. All I had to do was stick a spear at the center and tie another spear to it with a blackhair rope. Then I just circled around the first spear with the rope in a slight tension and carved the circle into the ground with the second spear.

Pouring blood along this guideline gave me a perfect circle, completing the first step.

"And I place the ingredients in a hexagram."

I then drew a hexagram within the circle and arranged the ingredients on the 6 points where the shape touched the circle. For a while, I was at a loss as to how to draw a perfect hexagram, but let's not talk about that.

First, I speared a point anywhere on the perimeter of the circle. Point A. The center point I already made when drawing the circle is point O. The line going from A to O and then straight until it reaches the other side of the circle is point B. Thus the line AB is the circle's diameter.

After points A and B are in place, I then drew an arc of the same radius centering on A. This should be obvious, but what I did was stab the spear on A, lifted the spear at the center O, and arced on the blackhair rope until I reached the circle on both sides. The intersections of the arc with the circle are points C and D. In other words, if A is the top, C and D are to its left and right. I then repeated the process with point B now as the center and got points E and F.

Now I just had to draw the triangles AEF and BCD and voila, a perfect six-sided star, AKA, a hexagram.

And after I painted the hexagram in blood, I now had a basic magic circle.

Finally, at the center I copied the Bloodseal mark on my palm that had an eye-like shape, and drew that freehand on the center of the circle.

Now I just had to place the 6 ingredients on the 6 points of the hexagram.

Which went clockwise from the top as follows: A Skeleton's Skull, a Mandragora, some Red Dog Blood, a Zombie's Head, some Goma Booze, and a Plumshroom. I piled a Goma and a Matango corpse at the center, and skewered them in place with a spear.

"And, done."

This right here was the ritual circle I created after countless trial and error. This would get me the maximum effect out of my Rotten Bog. Looking it over, I took in how similar it turned out to the occult fiction back on Earth. Maybe the fanatics back there were on to something. Though, I guess this might just be due to my own mental image of this kind of ritual. Anyway, all this work had led me to a process where I could gain a much more massive bog without expending any extra blood or magic.

I named this circle the Hexagram Eye.

Just hexagram wouldn't do at all since I didn't come up with the shape, but I figured I should give it a similar name. Gotta give my props to the math gods.

After all, the only part that could be called a personal touch would be the central eye symbol I got from Ruinhilde-sama.

"I can win... I can beat the Basilisk, with this."

This can give me the edge I need.

I can do it. I can kill the Basilisk. I was ready to solo challenge a dungeon Boss.

For the next 2 days, I focused on preparing for the confrontation. Well, it wasn't that different from what I was doing before, just more hunting mobs, mainly Gomas, and collecting items and ingredients.

There was a quiet agitation in my heart. This wasn't something like a surprise encounter with an Armorbear, and I didn't have Mei-chan with me anymore. I had the weakest Job, Shaman, and I was trying to fight a massive foe, a Boss, all on my own. This would be the first time I was risking my life on my own volition. I was nervous as could be.

"Listen up, Rem, I'm gonna explain the plan."

"GAGA."

Rem nodded seriously. We'd gotten all our preparatory materials and I spoke out the plan, mostly in order to make sure I myself knew it.

"First, we'll have #2 carry a Goma as bait and lure away the Basilisk."

I've confirmed that the Basilisk moves to hunt down any monster, Goma or otherwise, that gets too close to its Mandragora field. It did this every time during the time I was observing it.

But to make sure this works, I'd need live Gomas, not corpses. I already had 2 of those. I'd captured and tied them up outside the Square, and had Rem #2 on watch. With all my experience hunting them, I could now capture one alive without issue.

"We lure it to the Hexagram Eye I've already set up. If #2 gets eaten along the way, the plan fails and we fall back."

Every step needed to happen as planned, or else we're bound to mess up if we improvise. We could retreat if the live bait part doesn't work out and think up a new plan. We were facing a monster so we could get away with doing similar plans a couple times without it realizing what we were up to. Or at least, I hoped.

"And once the Basilisk is on the ritual circle, I'll cast Rotten Bog right under it."

The real fight begins here.

“I’ll instantly follow up with Blackhair Bind, and hold it down. But only the head.”

If it gets a chance to use its breath, I’m done for. My first priority will be to hold its mouth closed tight.

“I won’t be able to do anything with its body. That’s where Rem and #2 comes in. You guys need to attack it as much as you can.”

The more we can make it bleed, the better. Worst case, if it gets out of my bog, it’ll still be injured enough that we can chase it down and kill it.

“With its massive frame, it’s sure to thrash around a lot. We’ll be using ranged tactics.”

For that too, I’ve prepared a few things:

Red Knife Spear: I attached the Red Knife to a Goma spear. Great for stabbing the Basilisk from a safe distance.

Torch Oil: The oil that Gomas use in their torches. I stocked up every pouch I could find and have a total of 2 liters.

“#2, you’re on oiling duty. And Rem, you’ll go stabby with the Red Knife and light it up. We’ll turn it into BBQ lizard.”

Just stabbing won’t do any decisive damage to a monster that big. We’d use the oil to compensate for that lack of muscle.

“You need to make sure to only set fire to its hind area. If the flames reach its head, it could burn off my Blackhair and I’ll be decayed toast.”

“GAGA.”

I didn’t know how this whole struggle with time will play out, and won’t know until we actually went out and did it. But I wanted to keep an optimistic attitude.

“After you’ve used up all the oil and set fire to it, don’t stop attacking. All those spears, axes and knives we gathered up, give it all to the Basilisk, and give it good.”

“GAGAA!!”

The Rems nodded with spirit. We’re gonna stab the thing with every edged Goma weapon we got our hands on in the past week.

“The rest just depends on how long I can manage to bind it down.”

This was the most important job. Everything would go to shit if I can’t restrain the Basilisk with my tentacles. A big responsibility was on my head. Well, mostly because I was the only one here.

It was nerve-wracking. It was extremely scary. But I had to try. If I didn’t, I could never move forward.

“Let’s do this——”

Chapter 77: Basilisk Subjugation

Me and the Rems had to make 3 round trips to and from the Fairy Square and the crescent moat in order to carry over all the stuff.

“haah... haah... I, need, a break.”

We’d set out full of energy and determination, but all that heavy lifting really took it out of me. I took a short break before setting everything up on location.

I wasn’t rushing. The Basilisk wouldn’t be going anywhere today, or tomorrow, or the day after for that matter. Our prey is guaranteed to stay put and we had the advantage of choosing when to attack. This was one of the only merits of a Boss battle.

“And... done. Not too shabby huh.”

I was done drawing the Hexagram Eye to my liking. I’d already repeated this many times for practice, so I’d like to think I got somewhat good at it.

I spent a lot of time thinking about where it’d be best to draw this magic circle, finally settling on a spot at a corner of the Mandragora farm. If I got any closer, the Basilisk was likely to sense me as an invader, so I chose the nearest spot out of its range. If I wasn’t willing to take this risk, it might even give up chasing after the bait, not want to get too far from its territory.

And right now, I was ready. I gathered up my courage and set my plan into motion.

“Alright, Rem. Do it.”

“GAGA!!”

“GuGyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

Rem stabbed our little live bait Goma with a knife, not to kill it, but to have it bleed out little by little. So I had it stabbed in its flank, and it shrieked in pain. Of course, it was unable to move, or even thrash around, since I also had it tied up hard and tight.

The smell of blood and loud screaming was sure to attract the Basilisk’s full

attention. And it was fine if the Goma somehow ended up escaping its bindings, since it'd bleed out and die anyway.

And damn was it loud. With the bound, madly wailing Goma now affixed firmly onto #2's back, the Mud Doll set off in the Basilisk's direction.

"Rem, you hide over there."

"GA!"

Rem and I laid down in our handmade ghillies and patiently waited for the big fish to take the bait.

The path from here to the Basilisk was open, without any large obstacles on the way, and gave me a clear view of the Boss in the distance. #2 was walking straight to the target without faltering and the Basilisk was still sitting in its usual spot.

"... Got 'em."

Once #2 passed the half way point, the Basilisk stiffly raised its body. This timing was within my expectations as it always showed some reaction once moving prey got that close. It didn't seem to act any differently this time too.

"That's far enough, stop."

It'd be a bad idea to wait for the Basilisk to start chasing #2 since she wasn't all that fast, and it'd just catch her before she made it back. She was also carrying a Goma, so there was that extra weight too.

In order to successfully lure it into our trap, #2 still needed to maintain some distance.

"Yeah, yeah, almost... now!"

#2 turned back and went into a sprint, acting as if she was a dumb Goma that only just realized that there was a Basilisk there. The Boss in question reacted to this and started running after her, albeit somewhat slowly.

It took the bait!

"Come on, come on..."

#2 ran. The Basilisk chased. It ran in a way that didn't look fast and

furthermore, didn't make any sound. But it was slowly and surely closing in on #2.

Wait, is it gonna, no, they're too far, but then again, wait no, uh, maybe?

"—— Oh shit!!"

While worrying if it'd even make it all the way here, the Basilisk practically was.

"GA!"

Rem yelled powerfully, and in the same moment, #2 dived right at the center of the ritual circle like a high school batter sliding into the home plate.

The ingredients were all in position at their respective points. The center had an offering of an almost fresh Matango corpse.

And on top of that, #2 swerved and threw the bleeding Goma she'd been carrying. With this, the final piece of the sacrifice was in place.

#2, now on all fours, made like a cockroach, and scuttled out of the way. And then——

"Boaaaaah!"

The Basilisk opened its maw wide and went in for the writhing Goma.

Perfect timing.

"Putrefy, in the depths of vile red—— Rotten Bog!"

The scene changed vividly, yet in an instant. The circle and offerings transformed into blood red bog, and stretched out like a flood.

Yes, get wider, get deeper. Get so big that you can swallow that acid breath monster whole.

"Bubgh, baaaaah!"

Half of the Basilisk's body was now within my bog. I heard it's ear-piercing, shrill scream along with, yes, a very satisfying sizzle of melting flesh.

It was working. Its skin wasn't tough enough to withstand my Rotten Bog. Its front and back legs along with the bottom half of its torso was under acid and it

was definitely in a lot of pain. Of course it was. I'd never seen it scream like that before.

"Now die in my acid——"

In my right hand I held not a blade but a collection of small core fragments I'd accumulated from mobs, while in my left hand, I had some Power Seeds. Hadn't used these in forever.

I tossed the offerings in both of my hands into the giant bog.

"——Blackhair Bind!"

And the jet black tentacles that then rose from within the super powered bog was similarly powerful. These blackhair tentacles were the thickest and longest I'd ever made.

The ritual would not only grant power to Rotten Bog, but also to my binding Curse, Blackhair Bind, depending on the ingredients offered, of course. Though, the only things I found to be effective for this purpose were the core fragments which supplemented my mana and Power Seeds that slightly increased the Curse's strength.

But a slight increase was better than none at all. This battle was going to be a true test of strength for my Blackhair Bind. I was better off using up the cores shards that hadn't been useful at all so far.

A total of 4 tentacles appeared. They all wrapped around the Basilisk's head, tightening around its rubbery skin. I had now sealed its mouth shut, disabling its corrosive breath.

I'd heard that crocodiles, despite having insane biting force, didn't possess as much strength in terms of opening their maws. I really hoped this big guy was built the same way and focused my mana on binding its mouth shut.

"Ugh, a, damn it, uuh... uuuuuurgh!"

The Basilisk was thrashing around, obviously, but now that I was holding it, I bodily felt its strength, a strength fitting for its massive frame. I felt a tremendous resistance that, if I were to relax my concentration for an instant, would tear all the blackhairs apart.

Currently I was standing right in front of the beast's nose with my arms stretched out in front of me, trying to stand stock still with my utmost effort. I realized that I must look like a really dumb sidewalk mime artist.

But right now, I couldn't afford to think about stepping to the side and out of the way, or taking up a weapon and striking the Basilisk since, the moment my hold on it breaks, it will rush forward to escape my bog, and really, one tackle from its massive frame should be more than enough to finish me off.

This was ridiculous. In my head I was standing in a much safer position than this 'face-off'.

"Gh! Garrgghhhh!"

It whined in pain with its mouth bound. Must be the Rems attacking.

I could see black smoke rising from behind the Basilisk's back. Looks like they set it on fire as per my instructions.

The albino beast squirmed in pain as its ass was literally on fire. Its bulky legs kicked around inside the bog as it tried to swerve its body from side to side.

"Shit... dammit, damn you, die... just die, you fuck..."

Maybe the Rotten Bog wasn't as effective as I thought. No wait, maybe, right now, it was just my sense of time that had slowed down due to the adrenaline, and my bog was actually making quick work of its lower body.

But the fact of the matter was that I was reaching the limits of my stamina, while the Boss still had strength to spare, what with the way it was rocking violently.

Looks like they ran out of oil. Rem and #2 were currently busy throwing all the random weapons we'd gathered. Some hit, some were knocked away, but overall, it didn't look like there was much of an effect.

We lacked a decisive blow. The hell. The hell is this. I'm gonna die. Mei-chan, where are you.

"Urrghhhh..."

No. I won't wish for miracles. I still have strenght left, so I refuse to just give in. I can't hope that she'll save me.

“Save me, Nii-san.”

The image of Souma Sakura wishing to be saved was playing back inside my head.

And she was saved. We were all saved. By her brother, by the Hero, by Souma Yuuto. He’d rescued us in the nick of time. I realized then just what he was. I understood how she could believe in him. Believe that he’d be there.

But I won’t. I refuse to believe that someone will just come and save me.

It wasn’t like I didn’t believe in anyone. I was sure that Mei-chan was doing her best to search for me even now.

What I couldn’t believe in, what I couldn’t put faith in, was luck. I didn’t think I was particularly lucky. But I didn’t think I was born unlucky either. In this dungeon, I’d been saved many times by outside intervention, by someone else. And I considered that pretty lucky for me despite ending up a weak Shaman.

But in the face of true hopelessness, in the even of a crisis that spelled almost certain doom, in those moments of utter despair, something like a hero swooping in to save me, believing 100% that I’d be saved no matter what, was just not something I could do.

Why would I? Us humans had limits, all of us. Reality would always catch up. There is no hero. And even if there was, that hero won’t appear every time. He won’t even appear most times, really. He can’t save everyone.

Seeing Souma Sakura, I felt like she just didn’t get that, it was like she didn’t even know such a thing was possible. She believed in him with every fiber of her being. She believed in her brother, in Souma Yuuto.

In short, she believed from the bottom of her heart that she’d be saved, definitely, and from any crisis.

And me, I couldn’t stand to become that idiotic.

“Gghhhaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

So I won’t give up. I’ll put up a fight, I’ll struggle till the bitter end.

“GAGAA!!”

It was then that I saw that Rem was climbing up on the Basilisk.

Throwing wasn't working out, so she'd done this to attack directly. Wait, but I hadn't ordered her to do that.

No, was Rem actually acting on her own initiative?

"GA! GA!!"

Rem used one hand to stab the Red Knife into the Basilisk and, using it as a hold, she swiped down the Mantis Blade on her other arm over and over.

Stop, get off, if you fall off, it's all over, dammit.

"GAGAAAAA!!"

Rem payed no heed to my worries and kept stabbing and slashing like crazy.

She got close to falling off many times, but managed to stab into the Basilisk to brace herself.

"—— oooo, bauooh."

Finally, finally, the Basilisk's frantic resistance was weakening.

"Al, most..."

It was still moving and I had no intention of relaxing my hold on it. But I could definitely feel its strength waning.

Soon. Very soon. I was fine. My mana and concentration were both nearing their ends but I was fine. Now, it only had to slowly melt away. Rotten Bog would do the rest.

"Hah, hahaha... You did it, Rem!"

I hadn't let up. My hands were still raised. I wouldn't mess up now.

So, what happened next could only be called a surprise, it was simply the Basilisk doing something completely off my expectations.

"Buooooohhhhh!!"

In an instant, my world was died purple.

"Eh?"

Wait what? It's not the breath attack is it? It's not the damn Basilisk's acid breath, right?

How? Why? It's mouth is still clothed shut.

"Ah, oh..."

So that was it. It was those gill slits it had on its face, like the ones on a lamprey. It shot out all this purple from there. It happened all too fast, but I'd caught a glimpse. I saw those creepy whatever-holes spewing out the stuff like a pinched water hose. And then, everything went a very venomous purple.

Shit, shit dammit. How was I supposed to even know about that...

And while in the middle of complaining, I came to a quick and obvious realization:

Oh, I died.

Chapter 78: Vessel

“— — Ha!?”

I woke up with a start. It was still dark, so my eyes were fine opening instantly.

“Momokawa Kotarou, adherent of mine.”

A skull face was right in my face before I knew anything.

“Aaaaaaaahhh!?”

The first thought that crossed my mind was a sudden invasion of Skeleton mobs, but I did in fact know this particular skeleton face. He was an ally, or actually, he was my patron God.

“Ah, eh, um, I mean... Ruinhilde-sama, I uh... have I perhaps, um, died?”

I was in this God’s dimension.

Seeing his face first thing after waking up really knocked the drowsiness out of me, which was when I started remembering everything.

We were moments close to finishing off the Basilisk when its fumes shot out from those gill slits. I should maybe consider myself lucky to have died instantly from that. When Gomas got hit by its gas, they always screamed in extreme agony before inevitably dying.

“Well done, for you have realized the second truth. And for this, I shall praise you.”

“Eh? What, I mean, thank you, my lord...”

Excuse me, but rather than the usual deep and mystical lecture, I’d really like to know if I’m still alive or not please. Still, it’s not often that I get praised by a God, so I think something good might come from this.

“First, know that the star of another realm that you traced is not a thing to be considered a true magic circle. Yet, it is also true that what you made contains part of the Truth.”

“Um, do you mean, the Hexagram Eye?”

My patron God nodded. So since hexagrams were a concept from Earth, I guess they really were from another realm in Ruinhilde-sama’s perspective.

“I had believed to grant this to you much time later, but you have shown me agreeable growth— It is yours, Momokawa Kotarou.”

Ruinhilde-sama raised a bony finger and a poison bog-like pool started bubbling up in front of me. This pool quickly formed into a jet black lump.

“Um, what exactly is this?”

“A vessel of chaos. With endless possibilities, it garners man’s hope, yet, is trifling. The holder makes its use.”

“I see, so it will depend on how I use it.”

I just responded appropriately, but I honestly didn’t want to have to do anything with this Vessel of Chaos thing. I just stared at it, and had absolutely no desire to get my hands near any of that black, goopy whatever.

Well, from the looks of it, the lump appeared like a large soup pot.

The inside of this pot was a swirling black that seemed to go on for eternity, churning chaos as if it would be able to grant any and all desires.

Quite the curse-like effect I must admit, but, huh, I think I’ve seen this before.

“This is... just like Mud Doll.”

“Its uses are many. Use this Cauldron as you will, proliferate your Curse.”

I see, so it was similar to Takanashi Kotori’s Upgrade in that I could make stuff by adding the right ingredients. So a production type Curse.

“My utmost thanks.”

I do hope I can get a Curse strong enough to one-shot something like a Basilisk one of these days. But it’d be very rude to say that so I didn’t.

Anyway, from the way this conversation was going... didn’t it mean that I was actually still alive?

“Second, the Mud Doll does indeed have a soul.”

“Ah, so Rem does have her own personality!”

Now with this topic, I caught on right off the bat.

“You appear to be quite fond of it.”

“Sure am. Rem’s really great.”

I mean, she still looks like a Skeleton, but she always listens to me, works hard, and even ends up saving me a lot of the time. Rem’s such a lovable little thing.

“Very well, it seems I have no need to speak to you on the way of Dolls. Do well to use your Mud Doll as you are.”

It’s not often that Ruinhilde-sama spoke this directly. And since I was in complete agreement with his words, I honestly agreed with a ‘Yes.’

“Now be off, Momokawa Kotarou, for you have already opened the gates of possibility——”

“... Ah, damn, I’m alive, I’m really alive.”

I muttered solemnly. I mean, I always felt relief wash over me after an intense life or death struggle, but this sense of achievement was something I hadn’t had since that first Armorbear way back when.

“And I actually beat the Basilisk.”

In front of me laid a giant lizard type skeleton. There was no trace of the Rotten Bog and the ground had returned to its usual cold, dry mud. Which meant that this huge skeletal frame had to be from the Basilisk.

“Ah, good, the core’s still there.”

I could clearly see the red, glowing core through the mass of bones. I suspect that Rotten Bog continued working even after I passed out and completely melted down the Basilisk’s flesh. I didn’t know if cores just didn’t melt, or the Rotten Bog itself was being a nice guy and didn’t melt it for my sake, but I’m glad it didn’t. Otherwise, this whole ordeal would’ve been for nothing.

“Oh, that’s right, hey Rem, good work back there.”

“GAGA!”

Rem, who was of course standing stock still by my side till I woke up, bobbed her skull happily at my words. This action was also followed by #2 who was standing beside Rem.

“If you hadn’t jumped on the Basilisk, I doubt we’d be able to take it down as fast as we did, if at all.”

I patted her head. Rem’s current skull head was covered in an insect shell helm, so it wasn’t a point of whether it felt good to pat or not, but more like I needed to be careful since some parts of the shell were pretty sharp... Well, I’m thankful to her so I’ll take the small risk anyway.

If I had to guess, shooting it’s toxic breath through those gill slits must’ve been a sort of last resort for the Basilisk too. Under Rem’s mounted assault, my restraints and the bog still melting it to the bones, it must’ve felt desperate enough to warrant such a tactic. Something like a cornered mouse situation.

“That reminds me, how come that last breath didn’t do anything to me? I’m sure it hit me directly.”

Anyway, I didn’t feel any pain or other abnormalities with my body. Plus, I already knew from my observations that the Basilisk’s breath had no effect on any of my clothes or items.

“Huh, should I just consider it an extra service from Ruinhilde-sama...?”

I thought jokingly, but then I was suddenly confronted with some new information in my head that seemed to deny that possibility.

Venomic Vessel: Chaotic innards that repel a hundred poisons. A Curse that tramples on venoms, providing truth to pain insurmountable.

“Eh, huh, innards... like, wait, doesn’t that mean my organs are really fucked up now!?”

That’s human experimentation, Ruinhilde-sama! The forbidden arts!! I felt like shouting to the sky as I started quickly patting all over my body to see if anything was weird.

That being said, it wasn’t like I could feel these inside differences from the

outside. I at least knew it wasn't like an extra heart since nothing other than my original one was beating.

I was guessing that Ruinhilde-sama gave me an extra organ that looked like that swirling lump of chaos he showed me.

"Wait wait, calm down, yeah. It's not like I lost anything. This is a plus."

I mean, surely he didn't do something like replace one of my kidneys with it, right? I should try to look at this in a more positive light, like a Passive Skill that neutralizes any poison.

"So basically, if even Basilisk breath won't affect me, I guess I don't need to worry about most poisons."

I still didn't want to put it to the test by eating a redshroom though. I didn't have the guts for that.

Yeah, as always, the vague flavor text didn't help. But if it turns out that this is what saved me from that breath, then I'm all for it. If I end up getting hit by any poison attacks in the future, I'm hoping Venomic Vessel will show its worth.

"Also, this Curse's name, I guess it refers to Gu, that super venom thing where they put a whole bunch of poisonous insects in a pot in a sort of battle royale. Where the last one surviving is said to have the most potent venom..."

Nope, nuh uh. I was NOT going to be testing that out. Like, won't that mean I'd have to swallow live poisonous bugs to add them to Venomic Vessel? Like seriously no. I'd rather risk a redshroom than eat one of those creepy crawlies.

But then again, the description does kind of hint at getting something out of the poisons other than immunity, so it might actually have hidden effects.

"Nope, I really don't want to find out after all."

I'll just settle for the new anti-venom passive skill. No, it's not like I'm dissatisfied, Ruinhilde-sama. I'm simply admitting that whatever offensive boosts this Venomic Vessel can provide, I'm not yet worthy to make use of them.

"B-better luck next time I guess."

But then, as if I was being irritating with my disrespect, another piece of info

popped into my head.

Witch's Cauldron: The pot of a witch is not solely for meals. It is a vessel of chaos that can birth magic, curse and concoctions, healing and poison alike.

"Wait what? Did I just get 2 Curses at once?"

Huh, wow, I did, didn't I.

This one was a lot closer to the thing Ruinhilde-sama showed me back there. My guess is that if I used this Curse, I'd get a pot like that Vessel of Chaos I saw.

If this thing is as powerful as Upgrade, it should be very useful for any upcoming fights. In fact, since I could now easily hunt down small numbers of Gomas and Red Dogs, I could actually gather the parts and ingredients to use in making whatever it is I would eventually make.

"So with this I should be able to make my meds a lot better. No, it says poisons too... Oh yeah, if I can do poisons, I want to lace our weapons with them."

It was a big step forward, but not something I could test right now. Takanashi Kotori's Upgrade seemed to expend a lot of mana after all.

I'd gotten a nap just now when I went into God's dimension, so I could walk around fine, but my mana hadn't recovered quite as much.

"I should teleport out of here already. I can think about the rest at the Fairy Square."

I wasn't going to be waiting to be attacked now when I'm still tired from the Boss fight. I started quickly gathering up all the Basilisk bones I could carry and made swift preparations to warp out.

I still had a lot of extra weapons and things gathered up at my Fairy Square base in this zone, but they weren't so important that I would go out of my way to get them now. I'd already used most of the better quality weapons in this fight, which ended up being lost in the bog.

Well, the fact that Rem saved the Red Knife from that flavor of doom was something to be glad about. Otherwise I'd be really depressed having lost a valuable magic weapon.

“Any time now——”

Me, Rem and #2 all now stood on the transfer circle platform that the Basilisk used do laze around in all day.

I just need to hold this core up and the rest should be automatic. And this time, there wasn't anyone going to push me off either.

“——Mh!”

Shrouded in blinding white light, I teleported to the next zone.

“Ah, it feels like I finally did it.”

I opened my eyes to a scene I could call home, a Fairy Square. I'm glad we get transferred to one of these every time without fail. The frog Boss, the Orthus, and now the Basilisk too. It's home sweet home to a Fairy Square right after a tough battle.

“Man, I'm tired!”

I needed some well deserved shut-eye. I threw down the Basilisk's skeletal loot to a side and laid down on the soft, grassy bed that was the ground.

I closed my eyes and found myself quickly becoming sleepy, and soon I'd be in the land of dreams——

“—— Look what we have here, Momokawa, ya little git. Still haven't kicked the bucket eh?”

If that voice didn't reach my ears. If that familiar tone didn't absolutely destroy my drowsiness.

“I'm actually kinda impressed ya made it this far. Y'know, with that lousy Job of yers.”

My eyes fell on his mocking smile. His dyed brown hair, his piercings, and that extra gaudy way he wore his uniform. But I know all too well. That behind that frivolous attitude hid nothing but malice.

“Yo, looks like ya came to. Guess I should say it's good to see ya again?”

I would never forget the name of my mortal enemy, the first person I met in this world and by whose hand I'd suffered the worst humiliation. With hate

welling out from every pore in my body, I spoke his name:

“Higuchi, Kyouya...”

Chapter 79: Higuchi Kyouya (1)

“... Tsk. Thief huh. Well fuck you too.”

I cussed. I felt ashamed at how I thought I was gonna get some great power, and instead, ended up being a damn Thief.

“Yeah, guess I kinda overdid it in middle school.”

Shoplifting was my calling in those days. I stole whatever I could get away with. I didn't even want most of the stuff. I just stole for the heck of it. For fun.

While there were a lot of dumbasses of the same nature who eventually just got caught, I never did. At some point, I went and realized that I'd better stop now or there's no going back. I just felt in my gut that it was time.

So a month after I quit, one of my *lifting* buddies got himself caught in a collectibles shop trying to get his hands on this real high priced SSR card. Once that happened, it was only a matter of time till he was made to spill the names of all the other guys he was doing this with. I'd been clean for a month and counting, and had already gotten rid of all the loot I brought in, so they didn't exactly have any solid proof against me. That said, my folks did end up finding out that their son went around shoplifting and they sure gave it to me.

“Can't say I wan't expectin' you to fuck up one'a these days, gahahaha!”

My old man said after getting a crapload of punches in. It's like that saying, like father like son. I figured out why I was like the way I am all the way back in middle school.

All that having happened in my life, I was quickly convinced, or I guess, gave up on fighting the fact that I'd gotten Thief out of all the Jobs.

Then, when I accepted that new Job as mine, my head strangely got ahold of more info.

Throw Dagger: Throwin' a knife is the basics of the basics, mate.

Search · Hi Sense: Really gotta hone that intuition, and stuff like findin' treasure or sensin' danger'll be a cakewalk. And you got a talent for it I'll give ya

that.

Unlock: It's practically in the job description. Yeah, practice makes perfect and all that rat shit, but with some good intuition ya might just get lucky.

Huh. Guess these are those Skill things.

And what's up with these descriptions being like someone's screwing with me? God's saying this right? Yeah, I guess the God of Thieves ain't much better than one.

And looks like Throw Dagger's the only one I can use to fight monsters and that crap. And I can't use it without a knife or something like that.

I do have a knife with me though. It's a personal one. One of those butterfly knives that were big a couple generations ago. I got used to carrying one in middle school, and just ended up having it in my pocket in high school too. Plus, this little guy saved me a bunch of times when some random yankees from Black High popped up.

The good way to use a knife isn't stabbing people, but having the skill to slice 'em on the arms and stuff. Can't get away with downright murder after all. But you get good with the knife, and suddenly its your best friend when it comes to dealing with idiots. Some asshats out there like to think they're big shit if they know karate, or judo or boxing and the crap, but they got nothing on a bladed weapon. One cut on the back of the hand and they go crying back to their mommas.

"But here we gotta kill or get killed, ain't it— oy fuck!?"

I got this sudden danger sense in my head and a chill up my back.

What the fuck is this shit.

Then I realized that it must've been Search · Hi Sense telling me that there's danger around. I was in an empty stone room. I looked out the door from there and found the issue.

"Oi oi oi, you mean *that's* one of em monsters? Ugly little fucker."

It was this short man-shaped creature that clearly wasn't human. It had cockroach-like black skin and a face that looked ugly as sin. It had a rusted

sword too.

It was prowling around in the passage outside and breathing rough all the way.

Crap. Fucker's coming this way.

"... It's now or I'm dead."

I was ready to kill it. Calm down, I'll be fine. It's alone. Might have others somewhere but now, alone. This was my best chance to kill it.

My hands shook at first. But I pepped myself into stopping it. My butterfly knife felt sharper in my hand, now more than ever.

"Die, bitch."

And that's how I, Higuchi Kyouya, got started in this dungeon survival.

"— — Ugh, it's *you*."

"You sure are friendly after I just saved your ass."

I killed a bunch of those ugly little fucks, called Gomas apparently, and had gotten a bit more used to fighting like a Thief. And after a while, I heard a girl screaming and ran toward it.

I already got the Hi Walk Skill so I made it there in no time at all. I arrived at a big dome with a forest growing inside. I found the girl too, she was surrounded by a pack of Gomas.

She was a small girl, with short, black hair. I panicked, thinking it might be Yukiko, and went to save her immediately. If it'd turned out be some numbskull like Yokomichi, I would've killed him together with the Gomas.

And after I was done rescuing her, it turned out I was wrong.

"What? I know you thought I was Nagae-san, can't fool me."

"Ah? Did I now?"

"So it was true, you two are dating after all."

"Shut it. What's it to you?"

The one that's been bitching on for the last few minutes, Shinohara Emi, was

a girl who looked a lot like Nagae Yukiko, also a classmate and the one I was secretly dating. But this girl and my girlfriend only shared the same height and hairstyle. In everything else, Yukiko's leagues above. Most guys thought that Yukiko looked bland, but she had this delicate beauty to her and was really cute like that. Meanwhile, Shinohara here was below average at best. If I had to make it easier, while Yukiko's a solid 7 or even 8 out of 10, Shinohara's 4.5 tops. Make that 4 with those lame glasses she got on.

Me and Shinohara didn't have anything in common. We were in our separate groups, her being one of those girl otakus or whatever they're called. But she was still the leader of that pack, so she stood out in her own way.

Must be one reason why she wasn't scared shitless and had the guts to talk back to me. Though it could just be her being a dumb cunt and thinking I won't punch a girl when I need to.

"Oi Shinohara, you meet anyone else yet?"

"Sure, but he's not really someone I like. What about you? Seen Souma-kun or Tendou-kun maybe?"

What a damn bitch. Here I come and save her and she's being all choosy.

Whatever. Shinohara's the sort that gets off on fantasizing gay shit like Souma and Tendou sucking each other off. She's rotten in the head.

"So what Job did ya get?"

"Aquamancer, what about it?"

"The fuck's that, can you even use it?"

"I can, asshole!"

"So what were you doin' back there with all those Gomas?"

"T-they came out of nowhere alright, what was I supposed to do!?"

What do you mean 'out of nowhere.' It's kill or get killed in this place. The Gomas are smart enough to attack with numbers, so you gotta be better.

"*Haah...* it just *had* to be Higuchi, didn't it. I have the worst luck."

"I can hear you, oi."

“Let’s get going, shall we? Never know when those creeps might pop up again.”

“What, so you’re gonna follow me now?”

“Of course I am. Be a man and make sure to protect me alright?”

Shut up, bitch. Don’t girls preach on about equality of the sexes in this day and age? Protect yourself.

It’s what I thought, but somehow going with the flow, me and Shinohara ended up staying together anyway.

“... Wow, we *still* haven’t found anyone.”

“Hasn’t even been that long.”

“Yes it has! What the fuck, anyone, seriously, like, literally anyone is fine...”

On what happened after Shinohara started following me, in short, a few things. We got attacked by Gomas and other monsters here and there, and eventually, I found one of those things my Job’s supposed to specialize in: a treasure box.

We got a potion from it. Apparently it’s a sort of magic water that can heal practically anything. I wasn’t one to take things on face value, but the info we’ve been getting in our notebooks hadn’t been wrong yet.

Life here was a far cry from mindlessly waking up every morning for school. It was like living in a real life RPG with all the stuff constantly happening. It hadn’t even been that long since I got here in retrospect.

“Can you shut up and just walk?”

I’ve been in this dungeon for around 2 days now. In those couple days, me and the tag-along had only traveled 2, maybe 3 km deep. I guess this was another one of my Thief powers. I had a good grasp on time and distance. And it was thanks to this power that I somehow sensed that this dungeon complex was ridiculously huge.

So if it’s true that everyone landed in different locations, of course we won’t just run into them.

“You shut up! Ahhh, why, what did I do to deserve being alone with this creep...”

My biggest problem right now though? It was this stupid cunt Shinohara constantly bitching about one thing or another. Dumb bitch wasn't even useful in fights with how she freezed up.

Yeah, I know about how you can go loopy in this kind of scenario, but this bitch was really close to taking it too far. Now's around a good time I punched some sense into her...

“Fuck, no, calm down... I do that, and there'll just be more problems down the line.”

Yeah, I knew. I keow that I couldn't let myself snap in this sort of situation.

I wasn't the only one with a super powered Job. Everyone should've gotten one, and depending on what they got, even a weak little girl could have insanely powerful magic. I should keep in mind that everyone might have a secret weapon they can kill me with.

Let's say I shut this bitch up for now. Sooner or later, we're bound to meet other people in the dungeon, and when that happens, she might just have the opportunity to get revenge... In short, my best bet for staying alive is to not cause shit with any of my classmates. Since it's like that, I can handle some amount of bitching.

“—— Huh? It says here that only 3 people can get out... The fuck is...”

And now we had a clear reason to go against each other.

I learned this jarring fact about the dungeon, once again from the notebook magic circle, when we were resting in another one of the Fairy Squares.

It said that only 3 people could use the final teleportation circle in the deepest part of the dungeon.

It could be false info. It had to be. I wanted really hard to believe it too... But my damn Thief's intuition was telling me that this really was 'fact'.

“Wait what!? No, no no no, what the hell, no why, why only 3...”

“Oi, settle down already, Shinohara. It isn't set in stone or nothing and there

could be other ways of getting out, yeah? And look, guys like Souma or Tendou might have pretty strong Jobs and once they round everyone up, I'm sure we'll manage somehow."

I said that to calm her down, but I didn't believe a word of that myself.

Only 3 can get out. This was fact. In my head, it was already a settled matter.

Which meant that I'll need to change my non-aggression policy.

I knew that at least half the class didn't like me, they hated my guts so to speak. I knew about that, I had no problem with it either. Though the majority of these were the losers or otaku of the class. The once that went around spouting inane crap like delinquent, yankee, DQN. I used to just not bother with chumps like that, but now they'd all have powers, which was real bad news for me.

If only 3 people are allowed off this place, it means that the ones they'll try and get rid of first are guys like me. In other words, they'll have to suffer no guilt even if they end up killing me.

The other big problem is that with this kind of limit, you'd have to pick 2 others to be on your side. And you'd have to be very close to them if you're gonna trust each other.

For example, the Souma siblings. There's also Tendou + the Class Rep and Kenzaki + Takanashi. For the rest, there's the Sakurai + Hinagiku couple who're constantly all over each other, there's Kizaki + Kitaooji, the class lesbians, and Ooyama + Sugino, the class gays. If anyone's gonna trust each other with their lives, it's one or all of these duos. Which implicitly meant that they'd be willing to sacrifice others if it meant saving their partner.

As for me... I don't know if I'd give my life for her, but I'd save Yukiko given the chance. I mean, she is technically my girlfriend. Though, I'm still not sure if she likes me that much or not.

Anyway, this was the basic game plan: I'd make sure that me and Yukiko can make it back. I hadn't decided on the third person... Well, it won't be Shinohara, that's for sure. I'm sure I can find someone more deserving of the third ticket.

"So don't worry about it too much a'ight? We'll meet up with the others and

then we can put all our heads together and think up a solution.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right...”

There you go. Now I’ll appreciate it if you can die in a random ditch somewhere. You can do that, right Shinohara?

And, once I started thinking like this, I felt liberated, like a tight vice being released from my heart.

Chapter 80: Higuchi Kyouya (2)

The moment I'd been waiting for had come soon enough.

"Hello~? Shinohara, you still alive?"

"... nh, khh... haah, haah..."

Ain't so chatty now is she? Shinohara was breathing roughly, her face pale as if all the color had been drained out of it. Although, hearing an ugly chick like her breathing coarsely from behind me didn't feel sexy or shit.

"Don't die on me now~, we're almost there, just you-, ah, found it."

I could see white light at the end of the dim passage. The Fairy Square. I knew for certain it was one since the two of us had left from there around half an hour ago.

"So. How're those wounds now?"

"... Not, as painful, as before."

"Huh. So those plants do work."

Surprisingly well, I thought. I was half in doubt of whether those four-leaf clovers even worked as well as they were said to. But seeing was believing, and I was seeing them in action right now. I'll try to be more serious about collecting them from now on.

"Man, I knew you were dumb, but you sure surprised me with that stunt back there."

It was too dumb to even be on a gag show.

So after we left this Fairy Square, we arrived at another one of those dome forests, and got attacked by a pack of really obnoxious, red skinned wild dogs. With my current strength I could've taken care of these mutts in a matter of minutes but... let's just say a certain dumb bitch got too scared by their numbers and made a break for it. It was as if she felt not an ounce of guilt for leaving me behind to fight alone.

I honestly couldn't believe how retarded she was. She could've just stayed

with me, shoot a few of her water spells, and we'd could've quickly dispatch those monsters. We wouldn't have had to kill all of them either. If we just got half, they'd get cold feet and fuck off.

But Shinohara didn't want to do her small part. She refused to accept the pressure of fighting for her own survival. She just ran.

And what did she get out of that? It's a pretty funny story: apparently, after she ran a distance, a Goma suddenly popped out of the bushes and stabbed her.

This Goma had stabbed her deeply on the side of her stomach. She'd been brought down with that one move from a rusted knife. But the Goma wasn't able to finish her off since I'd made it in time to kill it with a Throw Dagger.

I'd once thought that this Skill was going to be a pain to use, but now that I had knives to go around, I'd actually found the skill pretty useful. I obviously didn't have a gun, and as a Thief, I didn't have any other ranged attacks like magic or archery either, so I was glad I had this.

So anyway, it was a pretty bad cut, so Shinohara used up all of her portion of healing clovers and somehow managed to seal the wound. She wasn't at the risk of bleeding out anymore, but, she'd spilled a good portion of blood already. The clovers didn't recover any of that blood, and so she didn't have the strength to walk back on her own.

But Shinohara still had to rest and let it heal for a while, so I reluctantly carried her back to the Fairy Square. I've never done this much, with even Yukiko, so you better be grateful, Shinohara.

"Shut up... uh, and look, it's not... it's not completely healed, is it..."

"Really? Sounds bad."

"Yes, I'm still bleeding... a little."

"Uh huh."

I honestly couldn't give a fuck. She was still bleeding right now, but so what.

That Goma really did a number on her. The gash looked so bad that it was somewhat funny to think a rubbing a few plants on could heal it.

“Uh, hey... you, do have *that*, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“The potion dammit!”

Shinohara barked. She was still real pale in the face, but her irritation got the better of her. Oi oi, chill Shinohara, your wounds are gonna open up again.

“Ah, you mean *that*. I do, yeah.”

Of course, I knew she was talking about the healing potion. It was the item I got when I opened a treasure box, using Unlock for the first time. Shinohara was right there when I did it, so obviously she knew about it too.

She was a dumb bitch, but she wasn't stupid or greedy enough to demand I just give her something I got using my own power.

“Use it on me, come on, hurry up already... can't that thing like, instantly heal anything?”

“Supposedly, yeah.”

“So use it already, what are you even waiting for? Why didn't you just use that in the first place, idiot.”

You're the idiot here, Shinohara. Do you really not get why I wasn't bringing up the potion? And here I was trying to have some delicacy.

“Nah, the clovers are working fine, aren't they? Get some sleep and you'll be good as new tomorrow.”

I stood up with a swing of my body.

“HUH!? W-what do you mean, don't try to be funny, alright!?”

“Oi oi, not so loud. It'll open up your cut even more.”

“This'd all be fine if you just handed over your—— arkh!?”

“See what I mean? Now calm your tits. I only got one potion, can't really afford to waste it if I don't have to.”

“Ikh!! Khhh...”

She made a face like she wanted to say something nasty, but because of the

pain, she could only let out a voiceless groan. Her expression scrunched up in a way that a girl should avoid doing. You're already ugly, so at least try not to look any uglier.

"I'll be saving it for next time. You seem to be healing so just bear with it for a while. Next time, something even worse could happen to you, and we won't have a potion anymore if I used it now."

I said, being intentionally irresponsible, turned my back to her, and started walking away.

"A'ight, I'mma go take a walk around. You stay put here, get some sleep."

"Ah, hey, w-wait, don't, heey..."

Sheesh, talk about a pain in the ass. Notice already dammit. No way am I just gonna give you MY potion.

I ignored her as she called me all sorts of names as I left the Fairy Square.

Right around 2 hours later. I came back to the Square, not having done much other than walk around the surrounding area.

I wasn't really looking for anything, just killing time. No, I'll admit, I was getting the jitters.

I couldn't calm down, but these 2 hours gave me some time to resolve myself. This was my path, this was the only path available to me. Shinohara could be healed up by the time I got back, and that'd be fine in and of itself. And if she was dead, that'd be fine too.

But if it was the type of wound that just kept nagging at you, if it was something that just won't heal without a potion—

"Yo, Shinohara. Still alive?"

"... Fuck you."

Shinohara was alive. Her semi-closed wound didn't look any better. At this rate, she'd eventually just die from blood loss anyway.

She'd been healed by the clovers to a certain extent, but they weren't enough to fully finish the job. They might've actually saved her from a much faster

death, now that I thought about it.

I should take this as a lesson. Clovers were useful but not all powerful.

“Listen, I’m thinking I can let you have it, the potion I mean.”

“You will!?”

Woah there, where’d all that energy come from?

“Yeah, not lying, I swear... there is a condition though.”

“What is it!? I’ll do anything, just say it!”

“Let me fuck you once.”

Oi, what’s wrong, cat got your tongue? You’re the one who just said you’ll do anything, remember?

“What? Didn’t hear me? I asked if you’ll let me fuck you. As in, my dick in your pussy, s-e-x, sex. Do you still not get i— —”

“A-are you insane!?”

Seriously, how come you’re constantly this loud? That would really will open up if you keep this up.

That being said, she’ll soon be screaming for a different reason, if you know what I mean. She’ll also have to move so much that it’ll definitely cause more bleeding. Speaking of which, her wound might just not be the only place where that happens.

“Calm down and listen alright. We’ve been in this shithole 3 days already, and I haven’t done it even once. It really *backs up*, y’know what I mean?”

“That, *that’s* your reason... y-you shameless creep! You’re actually trying to *rape* me!?”

“You say it like I’m forcing you. I’m making a deal with you here. Now, if you were a guy, I would’ve never even brought it up. A guy would have nothing to offer.”

But you’re a woman.

While I’m a man. Which means that you do in fact have something to offer.

“If you don’t want to, that’s still fine by me. I’ll just have to hold back my libido for a while. Think about it, if I was the type of guy who couldn’t hold back, I should’ve already raped you by now.”

No really. This dumb bitch sleeps without a care in the world. We were basically a man and woman sleeping in the same room, just a fountain between us, and the idiot never even realized how defenceless she was making herself. It was honestly so stupid looking at her, that I honestly didn’t feel like taking advantage of the situation.

“Are you, are you actually fucking kidding me... what kind of BS is this ‘holding back’, just admit that you think about sex all day long...”

“Alright, have it your way. Deals off then. Sorry about that, Shinohara. I’m kinda backed up here, just wanted to help you help me take care of it, that’s all. But if you’re not up for it, I guess I can’t give you this potion here.”

I said as I took out the potion, flaunting it in front of her.

“C-can’t you pl——”

“No can do. This belongs to me, and it’s very, *very* precious.”

Shinohara was stretching out her hand to take it, but I kept it *just* out of her reach.

“In the info we got in our notebooks, it clearly says that just by pouring this blue liquid on a wound, it’s enough to fix it right up. And it’s instant effect too, no pain or scars. Like magic, literally.”

“——do it.”

“You say something?”

“I said, I’ll let you do it, alright... Now hand over the potion, asshole.”

“Oi oi, watch the language, that sorta stuff really turns me off. I told you already, I’m fine with not doing it at all. Listen closely Shinohara, you’re the one asking here. Not me.”

I could almost hear her teeth grinding in frustration. She was getting really desperate now. She was already crying.

“I, I know that, okay... please, um, have se—nnh!?”

I didn't really want her giving me that sort of dirty talk. I'd reserve my right to make a girl say and do nasty stuff only if they're pretty, like Yukiko for instance. A sub-par bitch like Shinohara just needed to shut up and offer her cunt.

Well, I can't say I'm that bad of a guy. Otherwise I wouldn't have started off kindly with a kiss.

Having had her lips stolen while she was in the middle of saying her humiliating line with painful resolve, Shinohara reflexively stiffened up and almost tried to push me away... but maybe remembering that she'd accepted that this was going to happen, her hands fell limp as she gave in. She didn't even try to bite my tongue.

“—Nh, you reek of sweat.”

“... Asshole.”

Unlike her, Yukiko always smelled amazing. Though I guess I should've expected this considering where we've been the past few days. I probably stank too, and besides, it wasn't so bad that it'd turn me off.

“Oh, look at that, you got some good tits on ya.”

“Not really... it's normal.”

True. But with her looks, I wasn't really expecting much.

But I was pretty glad about it. It wasn't often that I got to handle tits with a good squeeze to them. Yukiko's pretty small after all. I'll admit, you win in the breast department, Shinohara.

Speaking of tits, I always wanted to have a go with a girl with extra large knockers. Someone like Randou Kyouko, the size on those, damn.

“Meant to ask. Shinohara, you still a virgin?”

“Does that really matter right now?”

“No, not really. I'm just trying to be considerate here. If it's your first time, I figured I won't go too rough.”

I could never *not* go rough with Yukiko by the way. It wasn't even me, she

became a monster in bed.

I mean, she's always so quiet, I wanted to at least let her go wild when she wanted to. I really liked Yukiko, loved her in fact, so I tried to do good by her. But Shinohara, she was more like a prostitute than anything. I didn't really have to be gentle with her.

"So, you gonna tell me or what?"

"... I'm a virgin. Got a problem with that?"

"Not really, it's pretty normal."

Now, let's just get it over with. I was ready on my end since a while ago. And after we're done... sorry Shinohara, I'm gonna have to go back on my word.

"—— Woah, damn, it *is* instant."

The wound was closing up right before my eyes as I poured the potion over it.

"... Ah, it, doesn't hurt anymore."

And it worked so well that she wasn't even feeling the pain anymore. The clovers should've helped but this was healing on another level.

No, the most shocking thing here wasn't the power of the potion.

"Um, thanks... I was kind of scared you weren't gonna use it."

"What? You really think I'm that bad of a guy? I can tell you know, I'm no psychopath."

"*Really?*"

"Yeah alright, I don't need to hear it. I *bought* your virginity with that potion. That's all there is to it."

No it isn't, dammit. The fuck are you doing, you absolute idiot!? Why'd you have to waste that precious potion on this dumb cunt? Are you actually retarded? I was mentally chastising myself to no end.

The surprising thing out of this whole ordeal, was the fact that I ended up using the potion at all. I'd meant to leave her here, let her die. That was clearly the optimal option for me, the path that'd give me the most merit. I'd been only thinking of making her useful for once and fucking her before I left her to die.

And my mind hadn't changed even while I was in the middle of screwing her.

I wasn't charmed by her, mind you. The act of taking her virginity wasn't somehow more pleasurable than if I did it knowing she wasn't one. Why would it? Makes no sense. In fact, it felt much better doing it with Yukiko since I was so accustomed to doing it with her.

But, yeah, after I was done... I kinda felt that it was fine. I was somehow okay with using the potion on her.

I felt so stupid. I couldn't believe I got attached to this ugly bitch just after fucking her once.

"Higuchi, no way, are you blushing?"

"Do I *look* like I'm blushing? I'm not the virgin here, dumbass."

Don't get cocky with me, Shinohara. You start getting uppity, and there won't be a second time.

"Heh, you sound like a tsundere."

"Oi, don't laugh."

"Ahaha, it's so strange. I just got raped, but it doesn't actually feel that bad."

"It wasn't rape. I went through the trouble of getting your full consent, didn't I?"

"*Haah*, guess it's true that you stop caring about the small stuff when your life's actually on the line."

"Bitch ain't even listening."

Shinohara was getting increasingly irritating with that wised up attitude of hers. Bitch only lost her virginity today and now she thinks she'll all grown up.

This was why Yukiko was the better woman. She always got her quiet and proper act down in spite of the fact that she was a massive pervert inside. And guys fell for it left and right.

"Strange, I think I can get along with you a lot better from now on."

"What a coincidence, I feel the exact opposite... what do you say we go our separate ways from here?"

“Oh, quit kidding yourself. I’ll be here to *occasionally* take care of your ‘needs’, so you better work hard to protect me.”

“You got a real knack for bossing bossing around, don’t you?”

This bitch was really starting to get on my nerves.

Ah well... guess I could keep her around for a little while. I gave up.

“—nh, take care of me, Higuchi.”

She probably thought I was into her now. Shinohara and I exchanged a kiss. Talk about forced affection. And though half reluctant, I assented,

“Sure, guess it’s fine.”

Man, this is gonna become a pain when I meet up with Yukiko again... I stood up with my body heavy, thinking about all the problems down the road when— Ah, this is bad.

“*Haah*, I need to clean myself, don’t you peek alr— Kyah!?”

Shinohara had stood up with me, but I instantly pushed her out in front of me, on reflex really.

“... The fuck?”

I came to my senses when I saw the spray of blood that followed.

I felt the wetness of blood on my skin. It didn’t hurt. It wasn’t my blood after all. It was Shinohara’s.

Right, Shinohara, what just happened to her?

“W-what, what just...”

Shinohara dropped to the ground. I did throw her just now. But simply falling over was hardly a reason for her to bleed like a fountain.

Wait oi, how the hell do you get a large gaping wound on your back like that!?

We’d just had sex, so Shinohara was still naked. The white skin on her back was now gouged open. The size of the wound made it clear that it was completely fatal. She was still gushing blood.

‘Sinking in a pool of her own blood’ seemed like the perfect description for

the scene.

I didn't get this. Why was this happening?

"Aaaaaaah!? Hey, you hit Emi, you idiot!"

"I, I was aiming perfectly! But then Higuchi, he just suddenly threw her in front of the——"

I saw some familiar faces at the entrance to the Fairy Square.

A guy and a girl, both from my class. The guy was Satou, and the girl, Iijima.

Satou was a typical four-eyed otaku. The type of guy who didn't dare get near someone like me. He wasn't as disgusting as Yokomichi, wasn't as loud and obnoxious as Saitou, and neither did he have a girly face like Momokawa. One of the real nobody types.

I get it now, so you're the bitch who shot that magic.

Meanwhile, Iijima was, I think she was one of the girls in Shinohara's otaku group. She should technically be her friend. But I can't say I knew the details. She wasn't friends with Yukiko or anything, and Shinohara never mentioned her either.

Anyway, I already had a basic grasp of the situation.

"Oi, you bitches——"

The one they were trying to kill was me. I didn't know if they were trying to save Shinohara, or if they didn't care what happened to her, but that didn't matter.

They probably saw me naked and relaxed after having just had sex and thought that it was their chance to get me. But they didn't account for my Search · Hi Sense reacting.

It had instantly put my head into danger mode.

As a result, even if I didn't mean to, my body moved almost subconsciously, thrusting Shinohara in front of me—— making her take the blow in my stead.

Shinohara died, and it was my fault. I killed Shinohara. I—— wasn't even thinking that. It was his fault, he chose to shoot.

Fuck this. Satou, I'm killing you.

“— — You're fucking dead!!”

It's been a while since I'd gotten this pissed. Once I started going out with Yukiko, I pretty much stopped constantly picking fights like I used to in middle school. I'd mellowed out so to speak. So this felt almost nostalgic, to completely let loose and forget about the consequences.

But in contrast to this burning rage fuelling me, my body moved smartly and dexterously. I quickly got down on the ground and reached for my gakuran. I slipped my hand into the pocket that held my weapon.

I flipped up the edge of my butterfly knife as soon as I slid it out, and now ready, I took aim.

I can do this. Attack spells couldn't be shot one after another like a machine gun. Some needed chanting, and others, while they could work without chants, they still left a gap in between consecutive shots.

Satou was the only one holding a staff. Iijima had a sword, so she could be a Swordsman or Warrior, but I'll deal with her later.

Having used Throw Dagger to the point of it becoming practically second nature, I could now tell a lot about the speed or accuracy of a knife throw before I even did it. And this sense told me that the mage, who was still hesitating between running away and attacking again, was easy pickings. I won't miss.

“Yaaaghh!?”

My knife struck Satou right where I wanted. I'd aimed for his right shoulder. It was a far cry from being fatal, but now, he won't be chanting so easily. Pain hurt after all.

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaart!!”

And I only pushed on from there. Without reaching for my belt that held my other knives, I judged that I should take full advantage of the situation, with the two still dazed from my earlier counter attack, and I ran at them with an intimidating roar. Even without any shoes on, (or any other clothes for that

matter,) my Skill, Hi Walk, activated smoothly, getting me across the Fairy Square in the blink of an eye.

“Oraa!!”

Once I was close enough, I jumped, still maintaining the speed. I struck my heel dead on Satou’s face as the bitch was still groaning in pain from the knife in his shoulder. I made him eat my full speed flying kick.

“Obgh, nhaa!?”

Satou was knocked down, blood spurting from his crushed nose along with his shattered glasses that sprayed its fragments everywhere.

“You like that, bitch!? I got a lot more!”

I immediately followed up with a kick to his stomach. The sharp impact on his solar plexus caused Satou’s body to rise slightly into the air.

The bitch had now gone limp, but I was far from done.

“Try’na kill me, ah? Hope you don’t mind if I return the favor!”

I was ready for this. I’d already accepted that I’d have to kill sooner or later. Satou, you should help me test that resolve.

I could almost thank them, these attackers. They reminded me that no, you really can’t survive here without the willingness to kill.

My doubts were gone now. I didn’t feel anything changing in me, but I knew. I knew that now, I could kill.

“Die bitch.”

I pulled the knife out of his shoulder and slashed his throat.

“Khaa!! A, haa...!”

Satou wheezed like he was out of breath. Blood sprayed all over me while I switched the knife into a backhand grip. I brought it down once again.

I stabbed his heart. Once, twice. That should be enough.

“Ug, ah...”

The bitch was now frothing red at the mouth. He’d die in less than a minute.

But I didn't exactly have the luxury to oversee his pain till the end.

"N-no! No, get away!"

From not too far away, Iijima's yelling was getting to me. Her hands were shaking in terror as they gripped her sword, almost ready, but too scared to attack.

Right. I needed to kill this bitch too.

"You're trying to kill me too, right, Iijima?"

"Stay back! I, I'm a Swordsman! I can kill you if I have to!"

"That a fact."

Who was she trying to kid with that pathetic stance. Her knees were shaking.

"Don't need that."

She was holding her sword with her hands all stretched out, so I went and kicked its handle, relieving her of her weapon.

It was a move I'd learned for dealing with scum who came at me with weapons in hand. It really saved me this one time when one of the more dangerous of Black High's punks picked a fight with me.

The bastard snapped and pulled a knife on me when I pushed a few too many of his buttons, but lucky for me, he had no idea how to hold one. It was really my first time pulling a move like that, so imagine my surprise when I sent his knife flying. Of course, I made sure to teach his body how a real pro uses a blade.

"Aah!?"

The bitch in front of me right now reacted much the same way as that punk, too surprised by the sudden pain in her hand to realize that her sword was now gone from her grasp.

The sword fell with a clang a little distance away. This bitch was an idiot too, she kept blankly following where the weapon was going and kept her eyes fixed on it.

"Ora!"

This wasn't meant to kill, but I put a good amount of force behind my fist as I punched Iijima square in the face.

"Ngha!!"

She wasn't as small as Yukiko, but this bitch was still pretty light weight. The dead straight punch with my full weight behind it lifted her off the grass a little, before she crashed back into it.

After kicking her sword away to a corner of the Square, I gave her the same treatment as I did Satou: a kick to the stomach. Girls were surprisingly weak to that.

"Want some more, Miss Swordsman?"

"I'm, sorry... no more... please..."

Oi oi, a punch and a kick, and you're begging already? Your Swordsman God must be crying with how pathetic you are.

"Iijima, tell me something. You guys saw me fucking Shinohara just now, right?"

"I, I didn't... see..."

"Fine, doesn't matter. The way I look right now, you might've already guessed, but me and Shinohara were getting it on over there."

I was equipped with my butterfly knife, but was otherwise, in the nude. Not entirely clean though. I had my body painted with blood from both Shinohara and Satou already.

"So she was a virgin yeah? She was so loud and annoying the whole time that I barely got into the mood, y'know?"

I only got to do cum once, sad state of affairs that. Now if it was Yukiko, she'd be all like, *c'mon, you can do more than that*, really egging me on. But Shinohara, she was just done after one time.

So, well simply speaking, I still had a raging boner going.

And I wasn't shy about it in the least. I made sure Iijima knew what I wanted and how I wanted it, displaying my full girth so she could get a good look.

“So I’ll be fucking you now.”

“Uh, uu... please, not that... anything but that...”

“Alright, I’ll just go ahead and kill you then. But, I’ll be killing you slowly and painfully, not the easy way like I did with Satou over there.”

Death or rape, your choice. You get to choose which you get stabbed by, my fully erect dick or my blood soaked knife.

“O, oh, okay... do w-whatever you want to me... just, please, don’t kill me...”

“Good. That’s a smart girl.”

Good choice.

This was my second chance. I couldn’t go through with it with Shinohara. I wasn’t able to make the cruel choice, once.

“Be good and listen to me, and I’ll treat you real nice like I did with Shinohara.”

But this time. This time I’ll do it. I’ll kill, I’ll rape, and I’ll laugh as I kick their corpses.

“— — huh, why... no... w, ait...”

“Phew, your pussy wasn’t half bad, Iijima. See ya, rest in peace for me.”

I fucked her for a while, until I was completely satisfied. After which, I stabbed the bitch in the chest. I figured I ought to do it quick, else I risked getting attached to her too.

“Ah, gh... a...”

Iijima looked at me, her expression shocked like she couldn’t believe I’d just done this. In response, I...

“Hah, I got it in me after all.”

I laughed. I was able to laugh just like I wanted.

Guilt. Morals. Regret. Stuff like that could just fuck off. We were in a damn dungeon and they’d just become a source of stress.

At least I was kind enough to give her a quick death.

“So how long are you planning on hiding over there?”

I was done with her, so let's not waste time dealing with the next problem.

I'd noticed this fag just after I was done giving my first load to Iijima. He was so obviously scared shitless that I left him be until I was done with my business with the bitch. My instincts were telling me he wasn't going to be a problem. This fag didn't even have the guts to attack me like how Satou did.

So I'd left dealing with him for later.

And my instincts were right on the money. This retard didn't move from his spot at all while I was getting my fill with Iijima.

“Get out here, now.”

“... Hi-Higuchi.”

“Oh, it's just you, Saitou. Ya looked so scared in that corner, I thought you're Momokawa.”

Saitou Masaru entered the Fairy Square, completely pale in the face.

Fag was dual wielding a sword like the one Iijima had and a Goma knife like the ones I used, right and left hands respectively. He wasn't as big as Yokomichi, but he still had a big enough body that, if he used it correctly, could apply a lot of power.

But this guy was a loser to the very core. He lacked the courage to even try to save a girl getting raped, and didn't have the smarts to pull off a surprise attack on me. I didn't know what his Job was, and I didn't have to. There wasn't a single chance I'd lose to him.

My Thief senses were tingling: This guy in front of me was a chump.

“Uh, uhh, uhmm... why, did you do all this...”

“I'm the one asking question, Saitou.”

I could easily gut him right here and now. But would it get me anything? The answer was No.

“I'll give you a choice, either die here, or be my slave and come with me.”

The dungeon wasn't so easy to solo. I wanted to have people watch my back,

people I could trust. Friends.

But that wasn't possible in my case. Friends to watch my back? I fucking wish I had someone straight out of shonen manga like that.

So my best bet was to force them. Find someone who looked useful and make good use out of them like a slave.

"A s-slave... wait, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what it sounds like. You'll get to carry my stuff, act as bait, and be my meat-shield when I tell you to. Anything, I say, you do. You should thank me for finding work for a loser like you."

"I, no, that I..."

"Don't like it, then die here, simple. This here is me giving you the right to live."

Tsk, damn fagget Saito. He was sweating bullets trying to come to a decision, but he was just wasting my time.

Fucking make a choice. If you think I'm gonna wait around until you wrap your head around this, you got another thing coming.

"I'm not a patient guy, so here, let me give you some motivation."

"Huh!? W-wait, just give me some time to——"

This fag was so pathetically slow. Saitou didn't even see me Hi Walk my way right up to his face. What are those weapons even for, bitch.

"——Buhaaaaaa!?"

I socked him in the face. Oi oi, you're a big guy, what are you doing getting planted with one shot like that.

"Look at me, Saito! You know I'm stronger than you! You follow me and you can go deeper into the dungeon. Work well for me, and I might just release you in the end, promise. So how about—— it!"

He was like a living sandbag that'd fallen to the floor because the chain broke. I gave him a decent serving of punches and kicks.

"U,urgh! Stop, stahp... I get it, I'll do it alright! I'll be your slave!"

“Looks like we got a deal.”

I gave his beer barrel belly one last kick before leaving him there.

I had work to do. I was filthy with blood and sweat, so I needed to wash up at the fountain. I also needed to see if Iijima and Satou had any good stuff on hand and—

“A’ight, time to head out.”

Now done preparing, it was time I finally left this Fairy Square.

“Walk in front of me, dumbass. I’ll tell you if there’s any traps up ahead, if I feel like it. Now walk.”

“Ugh, okay, alright, I’m walking...”

I kicked Saitou on the ass to get him moving, pushing him up to the doorway out.

Finally, I walked into the Square, to the biggest Fairy Walnut tree.

Under it, lay the still body of Shinohara.

I didn’t bother doing anything with Iijima’s or Satou’s. But her, I felt bad about leaving her body in that state.

It was a real pain, but I cleaned her blood off, put her uniform back on and rested her down with a white handkerchief covering her face. It was a present from Yukiko, and I’d used it for her like this, sort of reluctantly, but I thought she deserved this much.

“... Sorry.”

I muttered. I really didn’t know what I was supposed to be apologizing for, but I did anyway.

I had no other words.

Instead, I placed a healing clover, one of mine, beside her. I then stood up and said my good bye,

“See ya, Shinohara. You were an ugly and annoying cunt, but you weren’t that bad.”

I began walking, not once looking back.

I'll fight for my own survival. I'll use any means, make any sacrifice. I'll do it only for my own sake, and I'll make it out of here.

I dare anything to come at me. Whether it be Souma or Tendou, I'll take 'em all on.

And I'll be the last one standing.

Chapter 81: Hostility

“Yo, looks like ya came to. Guess I should say it’s good to see ya again?”

“Higuchi, Kyouya...”

“Woah there, you can relax man. I ain’t looking for a fight, promise.”

What kind of idiot did he think I was? There was no way he forgot what he did to me... no wait, knowing this piece of crap, he might’ve actually did.

He was the sort of scum that could go on ruining others’ lives without a care. His victims would obviously never forget, but for him, it’d be just another day.

Just my luck. If only Mei-chan was here. I’d even encourage her bashing his shit sideways, which I’d follow up by stripping him to his underwear, tying him up with my Blackhair Bind rope, and tossing him into the middle of a monster infested room.

“Stop right there, don’t you come any closer,” I cautioned him.

“Haha, I’m not gonna bite.”

Higuchi was still talking casually, but he listened and stopped coming closer. He also had his hands raised as if to show that he didn’t mean me any harm.

There was a good amount of distance between us, but then again, I knew that he was a Thief. Natsukawa-san, the other Thief I knew, would be able to dash across this distance before I could react, so if I assumed that Higuchi was at least as strong as her, I was already within his range.

Rem and #2 had, of course, sensed my distress and had swiftly taken up arms to defend me. But in all honesty, Rem, as she was currently, just wouldn’t match up to an actual Job holder. The most she could do was buy a few seconds for me to prepare my next move.

But there was still the fact that he hadn’t tried to kill me instantly when I warped into this Fairy Square... Which meant that he, Higuchi, had something he wanted, something big enough that he’d try to get friendly with someone he once tried to kill for no reason other than convenience.

“I don’t want to fight you either. But I have no plans to join your party, or talk to you for that matter. I’ll be leaving right now, and I hope we don’t cross paths again.”

“Aw, don’t be like that man. This zone’s Boss is a real tough one, help us out will ya?”

“You haven’t tried any other routes?”

“Getting past this Boss is the easiest one.”

“What about Masaru and Ayase-san? Are they dead?”

“Course not. They’re still with me. Oi~, it’s safe now.”

Maybe he’d somehow sensed that I was teleporting in and made them hide just in case.

On Higuchi’s call, Reina A. Ayase peeked inside from the Square’s entrance, and then quickly ran in with her usual cutesy manner. She maintained enough distance from me so that we wouldn’t need to communicate.

“Kotarou...”

Masaru followed soon after, his face looking extremely awkward. He obviously had a lot of things to say to me, but I didn’t want to have to bother. I didn’t have to deal with whatever sort of guilt he might’ve been feeling and I wasn’t the sort of big-hearted person that could simply forgive a once friend turned traitor.

“See? I know I don’t look it, but I treat the people on my side real nice. And those two are living proof, aren’t they? Seeing as I’ve brought them all the way here.”

“Sure, and since you have 3 people already, you don’t need me, right?”

“Gotta admit, there was a time when I was thinking along those lines, but uh, you could say I’ve seen the light? Anyway, I realized that the dungeon’s too tough with a party of only three.”

‘Too tough’ as in he couldn’t beat this zone’s Boss.

That being said, Higuchi’s proposal itself wasn’t all that strange. I’d even

experienced it once when the Hirano x Nishiyama couple requested basically the same thing of me and Mei-chan. Even for trash like Higuchi, he'd have the sensibility to cooperate in beating a Boss before yapping on about the 3 people rule.

So if that really was their current situation, I at least didn't carry the risk of getting back-stabbed before we beat this Boss.

"Alright, fine. I can work with you... but in return, once I show you how capable I am, you need to make me your 3rd member. Masaru's the 3rd now, but he's a slave, so be sure to get rid of him when that happens."

"Sure, I'm totally okay with that. It's true that we gotta decide who to keep on the team based on merit. It's only fair, right?"

"Fair, yeah."

So Masaru's standing in the party hadn't changed since I last saw them. Since Higuchi could still say he was fine getting rid of him, Masaru didn't matter to him at all.

And currently, that traitor was very overtly listening in to our conversation, but didn't dare cut in. He'd already been made to know that he was in the lowest rung, a place from which he even lacked the right to speak without proper permission.

"So, what do you say, Momokawa? Deal?"

"I'm not exactly happy about it but... sure. I'll cooperate."

"It's great that you catch on fast. Thanks man. Oh, and sorry about last time. Let's both try to forgive and forget since you're joining us and all."

"I can promise to not bring in my personal grudges while we're cooperating."

"That works too. Looks like, we got ourselves a deal. Thanks Momokawa, you're a real lifesaver."

"Sure, don't mention it, Higuchi-kun."

Higuchi and I exchanged a stiff handshake. And then, at that moment, I made my resolve — I'd kill him. Here. I swore it.

But first, I needed sleep. I stationed Rem and #2 to stand guard, but going to sleep here was my biggest anxiety, to be quite honest.

Higuchi had left me alone as I slept. I hadn't woken up to find a knife in my chest and neither had I been bound and gagged. This at least confirmed that the previous conversation wasn't just some big charade to make me let my guard down. His story about the high difficulty Boss now seemed a lot more plausible.

"Yawn..."

I yawned, looking a bit dazed as I'd just woken up, but in my head, I was already thinking up plans.

The first and foremost thing on my list was to kill Higuchi.

Why? Naturally, because of the simple fact that this guy was crazy.

Even if everything he said was true and he genuinely wanted my cooperation, I'd still want to kill him.

It was his psychopathic mentality. His attitude towards me on our first encounter and his treatment of Masaru clearly showed how far gone he was. I didn't consider that a bad thing, per se. His ability to make on-the-spot, ruthless decisions could be considered an important factor for survival.

But it was that sort of mentality that completely negated any form of trust I could have towards him. Sure, I could work with him, we might even beat this zone Boss with me on the team. But then what? Higuchi was unfeeling to the point that any sum of effort on my part would garner not even the slightest amount of his loyalty or trust. Even if I, say, saved him from a grave wound with my ointments, he wouldn't turn into a trusting companion like Mei-chan. He wouldn't bat an eye at letting me be fatally wounded even if he had the means of defending me.

Higuchi Kyouya was a threat to me, maybe not now, but eventually, and definitely. So since we had this chance re-encounter, it was only natural that I try to eliminate him as soon as possible.

But maybe I was just as crazy as him, what with how I was already making plans to commit first degree murder. No, I wasn't the same, I wasn't always like this. My mentality was learned.

That time Higuchi stole *my* core from inside the Armorbear that I killed. That was when I learned true humiliation.

And that time when Yokomichi attacked our party. That was when I learned that one of us students could, and had, killed another.

I had a clear motive, and even a logically just cause to kill Higuchi. So I just needed to do it. Kill him.

I wasn't harboring any doubts. There was no *law and order* in the dungeon. I had to do everything in my power to survive. When I attacked Yokomichi with my spear, I struck him with the intent to kill. I just had to do that again. My conscience hadn't stopped my hands back then, and it wouldn't do it this time either.

Anyway, enough about my resolve, that wasn't an issue.

The big problem was the how. How was I supposed to kill this powerful Thief with the measly abilities of a Shaman? I had to think up a viable plan, and fast.

"Yo, had a good sleep there?"

"Sure, whatever... morning."

"Hey man, you don't need to glare. What, you the type that gets cranky in the morning?"

"Nah, I was born with this face."

"Oh, that's right, isn't it."

Higuchi was acting too friendly for my liking. He was the type that would wait right up until we beat the Boss together, and then pat me on the back saying good job, while simultaneously plunging his knife. And I wasn't the sort of naive idiot who'd start getting friendly just because he was.

What was he really thinking? That if he acted friendly, I'd let my guard down? Or did he really not care... It felt stupid to think too much about it. If he wanted small talk, I'd just give him small talk.

"Ya didn't eat yet right? Want walnuts?"

"Just asking, but you don't have anything else, right... like snake meat?"

“Huh? Snake?”

“Snake meat can be surprisingly tasty. Ah, I mean the non-monster variety.”

I mean, I couldn’t exactly say since I hadn’t had snake monsters.

“Momokawa, you really eat snakes? Like, no joke?”

“Yeah. You can roast them over a fire and use the rocksalt that Gomas use.”

“That’s pretty out there, you a hero or something?”

What did Souma Yuuto have to do with this?

“Try catching a snake if you see one.”

“Haha, sure, I’ll think about it.”

Fucking Higuchi, he made a face like he’d rather bear it with those tasteless walnuts than deal with eating snakes all of a sudden. What a fool, to not have realized the true bliss that is meat.

I tried not to commit even a trace of this meaningless dialogue into memory while I ate a dreary breakfast of walnuts and water. Everything said and done, I hadn’t thought up any good ideas on how to kill Higuchi.

“If you’re done, let’s go for the Boss.”

“You what now?”

As if he was waiting for the moment I finished eating, Higuchi went and said something that heavily implied that we were somehow ready to face off against a Boss that I knew nothing about. Of course, my response was a firm ‘no’.

“Ah? The hell Momokawa, don’t be a lazy ass.”

“I’m not going. You haven’t told me a plan or anything.”

“We don’t need that. It’ll be fine.”

“I’m saying it won’t be fine. Aren’t you stuck on that Boss yourself?”

If this was Mei-chan with her Berserker strength, we could’ve viably attempted winging a fight against strength based Bosses, and come out on top most of the time. But let me just put this out there: a Shaman is someone that needs precise information about his target, and even after aiming only at its

weaknesses can the Shaman only barely manage to win.

“Ah well, you got a point.”

This idiot... No wait, maybe his apparent idiocy was a ruse.

Yeah, I couldn't imagine Higuchi actually being that stupid. He'd made it this deep into the dungeon mostly relying on himself, that is, he didn't have a strong supporter like Mei-chan or Class Rep to rely on. Heck, he was practically carrying 2 extra pieces of baggage.

If he was only relying on his Skills like Yokomichi, he would've parted ways with Ayase-san and Masaru by now. And unlike me, Higuchi had the power of sociability. He had The totempole trio as underlings, and could communicate fine with girls too.

There were even rumors of him going out with Randou-san, the one girl who was even close to Mei-chan in terms of bust size.

In other words, unlike me who was always minding my own business and being an otaku in a corner of the classroom, he was making connections to people left and right. There was no way someone of his smarts would talk this senselessly for no reason.

Just as I'd been acting friendly while biding my time... Higuchi was also showing me a facade.

Meaning that he was only pretending to be retarded, just to see if I would let my guard down.

For instance, say I accepted his offer just now. Say I went with the flow, didn't at all try to get more info about the Boss, made no plan or preparation, and just went for it. What would he think of me then? He would, from that point on, think of me as a pawn, that I was sure off.

And once he thought that, Higuchi, being the scumbag he was, was sure to make full use of me until I wasn't needed any more. I'd be a second Masaru, his slave number 2.

Like hell I'd let that happen.

“You need to tell me everything you know about this Boss first. How it moves,

how it attacks, any special abilities, weaknesses, even things you might think it can do, I need everything.”

“Sure sure, but relax man. The Boss ain’t going anywhere.”

“I know, so we don’t need to hurry. But I’ll still need to know everything first.”

“Ah yeah, explaining’s gonna be a pain in the, I mean, I’m not really that good at that stuff, so instead— — Oi, Saitou, you do it.”

“Eh?”

Gasped Masaru, clearly alarmed at suddenly being called. This whole time, he was sitting still at a corner of the Square.

“I don’t really,”

I was trying to say ‘no’ .

“Come on Momokawa, don’t be like that. Sure, there might be some bad blood between you two, but back then, I was the one who forced him to do it, and you know, he’s been pretty sorry about it.”

Of course Masaru didn’t do it by his own will, and I knew that. I could also imagine him being depressed over the fact that he was made to do that to me. But that didn’t mean I was ready to forgive him. Actually, did Higuchi really expect me to listen to his platitudes when he was the root of that whole incident?

“Look, we’re gonna have to fight a Boss as a team, right? And I know you two were best pals, I’m sure you can get along again like old times.”

“... I don’t think I can get along, but I can talk to him.”

“Good good. You gotta start somewhere.”

I wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up.

“A’ight, he’s all yours.”

Higuchi showed me a smile, that I knew was fake, as he switched places with Masaru.

Chapter 82: Killing Intent

“Uh hey, it’s good to see you, Kotarou...”

“Sure, whatever. Just talk.”

I had neither the intention nor the time to make up and be friends with Masaru again. The one I needed to focus on wasn’t my once friend, but Higuchi, and what he was planning by making Masaru talk with me instead of himself.

“Right, I’ll do that... er, the Boss here was a pretty big guy, and... I guess it looks like a Goliath.”

“By Goliath you mean from UB?”

“Yeah, exactly like that.”

So it looked like *that*. I guess it wouldn’t be strange to find something like that in this dungeon.

Goliath is a guy who appears in the Old Testament, a 3 meter tall, and buff as all hell, warrior. And David, (you know, the guy with that famous nude statue,) was the one who beat him. This famous statue apparently tried to capture the figure of the biblical hero as he aimed a head-shot on his much larger opponent.

So anyway, over the years, the name ‘Goliath’ has been used in lots of media, and the one we were talking about was a game both me and Masaru had played, UB, short for Undead Bounty. It was a zombie shoot-em-up and had a Boss monster called Goliath. And according to Masaru, the Boss they were up against looked a lot like it.

This UB Goliath basically looked like a gorilla. It had a lot of horns and spikes sticking out of it, and got red, glowing patterns when it went into rage mode, but was otherwise, just a big gorilla.

“Wait, does it also shoot beams out of its chest for no apparent reason? No wait, don’t tell me it gets boulders out of nowhere and starts throwing them at you?”

“No, that’d be just weird.”

Phew. That mystery beam and boulder rush were both insta-kill moves if they hit you in hard-mode. I was glad that this Goliath wasn’t irrational like that.

“But we only fought it for a few minutes before running, so I can’t tell you if it can use magic or not.”

“Okay, fine. Just describe what you know.”

“It only tried to punch or grab at us... but the problem was that it was too big and fast for us to handle. If Ayase-san didn’t help, we might’ve been toast.”

So it was definitely the super strength type. Damn, I’m not actually that useful in melee.

But now I was interested in Ayase-san’s powers.

“And what’s Ayase-san’s Job?”

“Ah, um...”

Masaru quickly glanced at Higuchi like he was asking for permission. I didn’t miss that.

“Reina-chan’s got a pretty rare one,” the Thief answered, “it’s called Spirit Master and she can use fire, ice and lightning magic. She’s pretty much like a master mage. Ah, technically it’s her pets, Guardian Beasts, that do all the work, so she’s more like a Summoner than Mage. You see it in a lot of RPGs.”

Apparently they didn’t need to hide it, so Higuchi explained the basics about Ayase-san himself.

“Uh huh...”

If what he was saying was really true, then she had a really powerful Job as far as mage jobs go. Any other mage I saw had only one specialty element. For Class Rep it was ice, for Nishiyama-san it was wind, and for Souma Sakura, while she was a special case with the Saintess Job, she also just had the light element in her arsenal.

And Ayase-san already had 3, fire, ice and lightning. That meant that she might be able to get more, like wind, or earth, or even light and darkness or

some other element I couldn't even imagine.

And her abilities weren't simply using the different elements, but using them well. I could guess this from the fact that her magic was strong enough to deter the Goliath enough to let them run back to safety.

Plus, if she'd really been weak, then Higuchi would be treating her not like a princess but like a slave. And since his behaviour towards her was the former, it meant that he also acknowledged that she was not someone to be trifled with.

"Got it. But I still need to see how you all fight in practical terms, so I suggest we try taking out some mobs in the general vicinity. Sound good?"

"Whoa there Momokawa, tryna find a weakness already?"

"I haven't fought in your team before, so I'll need to know some stuff. It's for better teamwork."

I couldn't tell whether he really suspected me or was just joking.

"Heheh, I'm kidding, I'm kidding. So you want to go now or?"

"A bit later, I need some more time. I got here right after fighting a Boss too, so I need to get some things ready."

"OK, pardner."

Acting as if he took my word for it, Higuchi had nothing more to say, so he went away and laid back on one of the fairy walnut trees.

"Uh, hey, Kotarou, can I uh, help with something maybe?"

"No need. You know what, you can fuck off. I don't want to deal with a traitor like you any more than I have to."

"O-oh, right..."

Yeah, his plainly sullen face wasn't going to work on me.

I didn't need to care about him. Right now, I had to reorganize my thoughts with all this new info.

Around half a day's worth of resting time later, we all left the Fairy Square so we could do that team building exercise I suggested.

“Wow, it’s similar, but there’s like a whole new feel to it.”

This zone of the dungeon still had the same concrete-esque stone walls, but while before, everything was shades of gray, this place was practically white. This zone looked a lot cleaner, and the light panels above seemed brighter as well.

“Oh yeah, there’s lots of traps set up in this zone, so watch your step. Don’t worry too much though, I can tell where they all are with my Thief senses.”

Traps huh. Maybe I was lucky, but I’d encountered exactly zero traps during my whole time in this world. The only time I heard of them was back when Meichan mentioned one. I had no clue as to how they worked or operated in the dungeon.

I wanted to fix that soon... but I had to get Higuchi out of the picture first. The more time I wasted, the better he’d know my powers.

“It kinda feels like a hospital.”

“Really? I don’t see it, oh, don’t step there, there’s something in the ground.”

Of course, there weren’t any white beds or that astringent smell of antiseptic here, but the clean and white area surrounding us felt very clinical. There were large white domed areas that seemed to mirror the green forest domes that I’ve seen a lot. All in all, it looked like a large scale hospital.

The rooms, the halls, the passages, everything was such a same stark white that it all almost seemed disorienting, but Higuchi was able to instinctively tell which spots had traps set up. Even the path he indicated just now, looked no different from any other. Of course, if it did, it’d defeat the purpose of the trap.

“Higuchi, how do you tell where they are?”

“Intuition. Thieves have a specialty in that sort, don’t know about other Jobs.”

Natsukawa-san also said similar stuff about her intuition. This likely means that those with the Thief Job has a high probability of getting trap sensing skills.

No, not just traps, Thieves were better at sensing enemy presences too.

“Skeletons up ahead. We can use them right?”

Higuchi walked casually with his hands in his pockets, but was still able to

accurately detect which way the Skeletons were supposedly coming from.

“You said before that the Skeletons here are the only easy ones right?”

“Yeah, they’ll be fine for practice.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Then, almost like a repeat of what happened with the Hirano x Nishiyama couple, we used Skeletons as fodder to show each other our abilities.

“— There.” Higuchi said “That’s about it. Kind of a bummer that the Thief Job doesn’t get any of those flashy finishing moves.”

“No, I think you’re pretty strong regardless.”

It was a unit of Skeleton Troopers. I’d first seen one of these when I was in Class Reps party and we were going around hunting Skeletons for their equipment. Back then, we were able to easily finish off those mobs as a 6 member party, but Higuchi was able to defeat almost the whole unit all by himself.

His weapon was a common Goma knife that, despite him not using Slash or any other Battle Art as far as I could see, cut apart the arms, legs and even the backbones of the enemy mobs. Once he cut them up, he would deliver a literally bone shattering kick to finish them off.

His basic strength far already far exceeded the norm, but this could be due to him simply being physically stronger than Natsukawa-san or even Kenzaki Asuna even back in Japan.

And this was clearly the tip of the iceberg. He should’ve already gotten a bunch of Battle Arts, and if he used those fine-tuned movements with a Skill like Hi Walk, I might not be able to follow him with my eyes. Other than attack moves, he was also likely to have support Skills specialized for Thieves. All in all... Higuchi was strong.

Right, so I also got to observe how Masaru fought, though not much. While Higuchi dove into the Troopers’ formation, two of those Skeletons broke off from the unit and came towards us. Masaru took on those ones.

He’d said he was a Warrior but... frankly, it was very disappointing. I mean,

sure I may have only seen powerful vanguard fighters like Mei-chan, Natsukawa-san and Kenzaki Asuna, but Masaru wasn't just bad compared to them, he was worse by magnitudes. With his awkward fighting style, he was barely able to manage two Skeletons only after using a bunch of his Battle Arts. He was beyond hopeless.

No, maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. This could just be how a normal person with a magical Job looks. If I'd been given Swordsman or Warrior, I'm sure I'd be just as hopeless as him.

But now that I finally got to witness his level of strength, I could understand why he'd let himself be Higuchi's slave all this time. This was his only means of survival in the dungeon. With his n00b skills, he would've died at the first Boss if he went solo.

"The next room up ahead has some Skeletons too. Your turn Momokawa."

"Sure."

"Call out if you don't think you can handle it. We're teammates now, gotta help each other out, right?"

My turn came along with another asinine line of platitudes.

We'd scavenged some of the better equipment from the last unit of Troopers, so now Rem and I were better equipped. Rem dual-wielded a sword and club, while #2, who was not as strong, equipped a club only to focus on blunt damage. I had an iron spear like usual.

"Let's go, Rem. Just like the usual."

Rem and #2 dashed into vanguard positions while I was rear support. The three of us had experience hunting tons of Skeletons to prepare for the Basilisk fight. The Troopers here looked to have better equipment than the one's in the poison zone, but they weren't all that much stronger.

My spear was useless as I only used a Blackhair Bind tentacle furnished with stones at the tips to deal blunt blows. Once Rem and #2 beat them down enough that they were slow to react, I was able to crush them with my tentacle hammer.

Though truth be told, it was faster to just let the two of them handle everything. The fight ended with the Mud Doll duo scoring more than half of the kills.

“That’s pretty much how I do it.”

“... Nice, you’re pretty strong yourself Momokawa.”

“No no, that took everything I had.”

Thankfully, I was able to hide my stronger Shaman Skills. I only used the one blackhair tentacle for the makeshift stone hammer, while I completely hid the existence of Rotten Bog and Redhair Twine. They also didn’t know about the Red Knife, my fire enchanted weapon.

Still, I don’t expect Higuchi to actually believe that this was my full strength.

I was tense and nervous as to how far Higuchi had been able to deduce about my other abilities, and also whether he’d sensed my intent to murder him. The both of us displayed only friendly facades as we progressed further into the dungeon.

“— — There. The Boss Room is right after this one.”

We’d arrived at our destination. Splayed out before me was another large, circular hall room, but this one with an ostentatious gate standing on the other end, in addition to a white monolith in the center that looked like a grave stone.

“And what’s that white monolith supposed to be?”

“A save point, duh.”

What a nice dungeon, to kindly set up a save point right outside a Boss Room.

“You mean, you don’t know. Got it.”

“Come on, Momokawa, I thought you’d like that one.”

“That’s what I thought when I saw a Fairy Square for the first time too. This one’s more like a checkpoint.”

“Welp, that’s a real otaku for ya. You know your stuff.”

It almost felt natural how easily he was able to make fun of me. It was still beyond annoying. Someone like me just can’t get along with an honest to god

DQN punk like Higuchi.

“Hmm, it really stands out here. Makes me think it has some purpose... did you try putting a core near it?”

“We did yeah. Nothing. My intuition also told me that this wasn’t a trap.”

I touched the stone object all over and without any reserve, which lead to no particular result. I even borrowed a small core from Higuchi and touched it in multiple places, which also showed no reaction.

“Maybe it’s a transfer device?”

But even if that was the case, I simply didn’t know how to use it. I couldn’t find anything like a switch and neither was there any slot or groove to place a core in.

I did have one weird theory where this might be a flag event object that only reacts to the chosen one, like Souma Yuuto. He *was* the Hero and all.

“Yo, you done yet?”

“Yeah, I’m done. Couldn’t find anything either.”

I returned the core, and after giving the hall one more look over, I was ready to go back to the Square.

“You wanna go take a sneak peek at the Boss?”

“Need more time. Those Skeletons had some good stuff and I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

“Careful ain’t ya.”

“Well yeah, life on the line and everything. Of course I’m gonna take my time preparing.”

“*Haah*, boring... but you got a point.”

Higuchi accepted my proposal to return and had now turned his back to me.

Now was my chance.

My gut was telling me to go for it, and I believed that it was right. Higuchi wasn’t looking at me, his hands were still in his trouser pockets and he believed

that I would be silently following right behind.

Just now, I said that I'd take my time preparing. But the most important thing in a fight is to know when to just go for it.

And I knew that that time was now. Now was my biggest and only chance. If I went along with Higuchi any longer, he'd definitely make me into his pawn. I could honestly say that he was stronger than me. And once he is also sure that I couldn't do much against him, I'd become another of his slaves. Like Masaru.

Okay, I can do this. Right here, right now, I'll kill Higuchi.

"Entwine its escape, with weaving hair,"

I chanted that only inside my head. He was a Thief, and would likely hear me no matter how quietly I said it. I wasn't going to take even the smallest chances.

As for Masaru and Ayase-san... great, they were already outside on look out. They shouldn't be able to get to him on time.

Calm down, you got this. I have the power and weapons needed to instantly kill one unsuspecting and unarmed human being. I can do it, I will do it. I will kill him.

"——Blackhair Bind!!"

Chapter 83: Friend

First, I needed to hold him in place. I cast a full chant, full power Blackhair Bind, and manifested it from within Higuchi's own shadow as he was walking away with his back to me.

The reason I didn't use Redhair Twine was because that Curse needed my blood to function, and I'd need to at least raise my arms to shoot the red, acidic wires at him. So instead, I figured that with Blackhair, I could be attacking from closer, ergo faster, coming from right under his feet, in addition to having a guaranteed element of surprise.

"Uoh!?"

Got him!

The worst case scenario, where Higuchi's intuition would sense my attack coming and thereby dodge the close range tentacles, didn't happen.

The nimble Blackhair tentacle quickly wrapped itself around Higuchi's ankles, winding up to his waist so fast that it looked like he was being swallowed whole. His arms had been in his trouser pockets so the tentacle was able to wind around his whole body in a way that made him completely immobile.

The thinning tip of the tentacle spiraled up still more, now squeezing around his throat as if resonating with my antipathy towards him. But I wasn't about to waste precious time strangling him.

"Go!!"

I commanded as I let go of my spear, in its place, unsheathing the Red Knife and a normal one and launching them straight at Higuchi. I had of course, attached the duo of knives to a pair of Blackhair tentacles, making my chance of landing both hits on him, practically 100%. Higuchi was currently standing still like a scarecrow in an open field. He was a target I couldn't possibly miss.

As I'd commanded them, Rem and #2 were also charging at my restrained prey, holding their respective weapons.

My dual knife strikes in addition to flanking attacks from both Rem and #2

should leave Higuchi in dire straights no matter how superhuman his current strength was. But even if all that still can't put him down, I only need to repeatedly stab him until he breathes his last.

“Die!! Higuchiiiiiii!!!”

“— — Wow, takin' big risks there, Momokawa.”

I felt my knives strike only air. Why, how come I missed?

No, more importantly, why wasn't Higuchi *there* anymore?

“And here I thought Thru Bind was gonna be useless. Hehe, the God of Thieves really knows his stuff.”

Thru Bind. Dammit, that's right, Higuchi had actually escaped *through* my Blackhair Bind, effortlessly even.

The sheer speed with which he performed this feat was so fast it was practically magic. Even though I'd bound him up so completely, I couldn't even register him escaping.

And my knives that were dead set on gutting Higuchi only moments before, were now stabbing the space he was supposed to be, but in fact, wasn't. Even the Blackhair tentacles that had been binding him still maintained the contours of his body.

Higuchi himself was currently standing just one step away from the mishmash of knives and Curses that should've guaranteed his death.

What the actual fuck. No way could he have prepared for this. How can there possibly be a specialized Skill that can get him out of any sort of bound state... No, this might just be the sort of Skill that's unique to the Thief Job.

“Fuuck! Rem!!”

“Hahah, too late!!”

Higuchi raised his leg to make a kick, his hands still stuffed in his pockets. His casual kicking posture didn't have the elegance the likes of a polished technique delivered by Kenzaki Asuna, but he more than made up for it with his superhuman strength and speed.

The sole of Higuchi's foot hit squarely on Rem's abdomen just as she'd come close enough to strike him with her sword. Reinforced with Knight Mantis parts, the current Rem should've been as heavy as me, but she was nonetheless, easily sent flying.

"Oof, the hell, that thing's harder than I thought."

He must've expected to break Rem's armor with that kick, which fortunately, hadn't happened. I didn't see any cracks on Rem's green body armor while she was still rolling on the ground from the previous impact.

"But this one— Haha, broke like a sand castle."

Higuchi had speedily landed a second kick on #2 who reached him at almost the same time as Rem. But unlike her Mantis framed sister body, #2 only had a Skeleton base with a few Mandragoras added in. Her body, far less resilient, had shattered as it was also sent flying by Higuchi's war-hammer of a kick.

#2 crumbled apart at the stomach, her two halves landing separately... Nope, nothing, I wasn't getting any more reaction from her. #2 was gone.

"Weak. You're still weak, Momokawa. And your stupid mud dolls are, heh, junk, that's what they are. Fitting minions for the weakest Job."

"Wait. Higuchi, I'm sure you didn't forget that one special ability I have, right?"

"Course, I remember. It's hard to forget a punch to the gut like that."

Shit, shit, shit... Think, Momokawa Kotarou, think. With things as they are, I should give up on killing Higuchi and just focus on running away.

I could imagine Higuchi being completely furious right about now, and even if he wasn't, he had surely labeled me as a hostile enemy. But as long as I had Pain Return, he wouldn't try to kill me directly.

"Don't you dare think of killing me, Higuchi. Spare me from going down to hell with you."

"Heheh, ya don't hafta tell me twice, Momokawa."

"I promise I'll never get involved with you ever again, so let me leave from here right now. Peacefully."

Your move, Higuchi. Even if you try to kill me here, I'm not as weak as I was back then. I won't let you beat me to a pulp like that, ever again.

True, my surprise attack ended in failure, but I was far from powerless. If he sent Masaru, who still couldn't harness his Warrior abilities, to beat me up, I could think up a few ways to deal with him with Blackhair Bind and Rotten Bog. He should realize that, like a cornered rat, my bite wasn't going to leave him with just scratches.

"Chill out Momokawa. Honestly, I'm not even that mad at you."

Higuchi shrugged as he sneered out those words. What kind of bullshit was it this time? He obviously wasn't still planning on making me join his party, that I knew for sure.

"Momokawa, you got balls, I'll give you that. I didn't think you'd try to kill me this early. This kind of thing is literally impossible for a loser like Saitou. Heck, you might just be better at this than anyone else."

Thanks, I'm putting my life on the line here, so I'll take that as a complement.

"You don't *feel* like you killed anyone yet... but I can tell, you're dead serious."

He was able to *tell* stuff with his Thief intuition, which likely also clued him in on the fact that I was up to something. There was also the possibility that he only let himself get caught in the tentacle bind because he knew he could get out of it with Thru Bind.

"... What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that I'll admit it. I'll admit that you're a worthy enemy. It takes some serious balls to try and kill me with your shitty excuse for a Job, but you're the sort that might just pull it off. That's why you're a threat, an enemy."

His tone remained casual in spite of his serious words, which could only mean...

"So I did some thinking too. And I came up with a good way to kill you."

Dammit, Higuchi had already thought up a way to kill me!

"Blackhair——"

“Hahah!! Too slow, Momokawaa!!”

I had attempted to bind him from his own shadow once again, but he nimbly jumped away, evading the tentacle. Shit, so he was able to dodge just fine if he could see me do it. A Thief’s agility was not to be underestimated.

Wait a second, Higuchi didn’t only dodge just now. Didn’t I see him do something else?

“Akh!?”

I heard the clink of metal hitting stone, probably the monolith, behind me. At the same time, I felt a sting on my cheek. Wait what? A knife? Goddammit, I didn’t even see him getting ready to throw that. This might also be one of his Thief Skills.

“Ukh, fuck, that stung like hell.”

But the fact that he cut me also meant that Higuchi himself had to bear the same pain. I could see a smooth cut on his cheek and a clear line of blood dripping down from the wound.

But that repulsive smile was still stuck on his face.

Calm down. No matter where he cut me, so long as he was also damaged in the process, Higuchi wouldn’t dare aim for any vitals. He also couldn’t afford to limit my actions by targeting my arms and legs. The status quo was still—

I suddenly heard a mechanical crank of moving parts, and the next thing I knew, the ground underneath me was gone.

“Eh?”

My feet stood on nothing. The solid white stone floor that I was standing on had simply disappeared.

Huh? What is this? No no no, wait, it can’t be... a pitfall?

“Uaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?”

I reached out my hands in delirium. No good. The area that had vanished from below me wasn’t so small that I could reach for the edge. No matter how desperately I stretched out my arms, they didn’t have anything to grab on to.

“Reeeeeeeeeemmmmm!”

Blackhair Bind shot out of my palm. I made the tentacle rope as quickly and as tough as possible. That pre-Boss Room had nothing other than the monolith at its center, so only Rem could grab the rope that separated me from life and death.

“GAGA!!”

“Urgh!?”

I felt a jolt as my body abruptly stopped its descent. It felt as if my arm was going to tear off of my shoulder. I only barely swallowed the pain.

“Urh... holy, fuck...”

I looked down only to see endless darkness underneath me. I could feel a cold breeze coming from below. That settled it, falling down there meant absolute death.

No, what mattered now was getting back to solid ground. I slowly absorbed back the tentacle, gently pulling myself upwards.

On Rem’s side, she had wrapped the other end of the tentacle rope around her waist and was worriedly peering down at me. Good. It looked like Rem had a firm hold on the rope and the rope itself was tough enough to support my weight. I should be able to make it like this.

“Wew, an instant rope, not bad. Not bad at all, Momokawa. It looks useful, so you must’ve practiced a lot.”

“H-Higuchi...”

Higuchi’s face screamed of morbid joy as he clutched on to Rem’s skull, mockingly peering down the hole. Rem was giving it her all just bracing herself so I wouldn’t fall, and couldn’t really do anything about it.

“What now, Momokawa? What’ll you do once I push your cute little Mud Doll off and it falls with you?”

“Shit, shittt. You, you planned this. You planned on using this pitfall all along.”

He couldn’t just stab me normally since he’d die too, but he could try all

manner of indirect methods. For example, he could push the switch to a pitfall trap. This wouldn't be the same as physically pushing me off a ledge. He could pull a lever, push a switch, or make me unknowingly do any of those.

But would that sort of indirect attack... really work to deter Pain Return?

I'd never tried it, but my gut was telling me that yes, it would work.

Pain Return would have absolutely zero effect on him if he were to push Rem off and let me fall to my doom.

"This isn't your normal pitfall, just to let you know. Go on, try to guess how I set it off."

Higuchi spoke to me while swiveling Rem's head with his palm, as if to tell me that any strange moves from me and he'd do it.

He now had control over my only lifeline. It might seem like him gloating about it was a stupid move, but maybe the position of power really got him going. Higuchi looked like he was having a blast.

"The knife... no, it was blood."

"Oh. Good job, you're right."

This pitfall mechanism had activated right after Higuchi threw his knife. The knife had grazed past my cheek and only stopped after hitting the monolith behind me. If he only needed to use the knife, it would be meaningless to injure himself by cutting me.

Which meant that he needed to somehow get my blood to the monolith to make it work.

"If it works by blood, that means that the monolith is some sort of sacrificial altar. You knew this and you guided me here for that purpose."

"Wow, you're on a roll Momokawa. You damn otakus really know your stuff, eh? I bet you played games with this sort of stuff all day."

"Hey listen Higuchi. Don't mess with shady stuff like sacrificial altars. You never know what it might do. Most times, this sort of thing just summons a really powerful monster."

“Nah, not this one. This is just a teleporting device.”

How did he know that? He clearly wasn't bluffing, he was saying it like it was a fact.

“Do the words, Ancient Tongue, mean anything to you?”

“Wait, you have a Skill to read that!?”

“What, you can read it too? No, you know someone who can... well too bad you didn't notice it.”

So that's it. He must have gained a reading Skill like Takanashi Kotori's Decode Ancient Tongue: Basic which he used to read the instructions for activating the trap set up in the monolith. This was how he also knew for sure that this was some sort of transfer device that needed a sacrifice. I hadn't seen anything that looked like letters when I was scrutinizing the object... no, maybe it was just that I *couldn't*, since I didn't have the required Skill.

“I'm gonna be using this to get to the next zone without needing to beat the Boss. It all comes down to whether you have the right Skills or not in this dungeon. If you're gonna curse anyone, curse the God of Shamans who only gave you shit Skills. You can do that plenty once you're dead——”

“W-wait Higuchi!!”

Shouted a voice that wasn't mine.

“Ah? Fuck off, Saitou. And add the '-san' you fucking fatass.”

“This isn't what you said! You said we'd work together with Kotarou to beat the Boss, right!?”

“I'm not saying it again. Fuck off, bitch!”

What the fuck, how come Masaru was doing this all of a sudden? He didn't have any place in this. I was the one who was about to die and he, a loyal slave shouldn't have had anything to worry about. He wasn't going to get any thanks from me trying to feel guilt this late in the game.

“Please man, you don't gotta do this, no really, you don't have to kill him right? Yeah, Kotarou's got a super weak Job too, so you can just——”

“Fuck that, think before you use that blowhole. That little motherfucker down there tried to kill me and it won’t be the last time. His Job doesn’t matter. He ain’t a loser like you.”

Well of course my Job didn’t matter if I wanted to kill someone. I only need a knife to slit someone’s throat in their sleep. He’d be insane to try and recruit someone who’s tried to kill him once already.

“Ain’t that right, Momokawa!? You hate my guts, and you’ve hated me ever since I stole that core from you!”

Yeah. Ever since.

“But let me tell you one thing, I ain’t letting myself get killed, not by you, not by anyone. Who cares how much you hate me, I sure as hell don’t give a fuck... I’ll laugh as I kill you, and anyone else who tries this shit!”

He would. Higuchi Kyouya was just that sort of person.

“So fuck off with your friendship crap, Saitou! Since you’re here, just stand there and watch, watch as your friend falls to his death!”

Then, Higuchi pushed Rem off. In fact, he kicked her off, and Rem was helpless to do anything about it. She was using all her strength and balance to keep me from falling and that had left her completely defenseless. And now she was falling, falling with me into the pits of a dark hell.

My eyes met those of Higuchi beyond my reached out hand. His eyes showed crazed delight. He kept watching, despite his certain victory he kept watching to see if I made any move with my Blackhair tentacles. He had also taken out his butterfly knife that glinted as if to tell me any struggling would be futile.

Despite knowing that he would just cut it off, I had no choice, I had to try!

“Uaaaaaaaaaah, Kotarou!!”

My body jolted a second time as it stopped falling. Wait, why? I hadn’t shot out any new tentacles so why?

“Tsk, Saitou, you bitch...”

“You’ll be fine, Kotarou! I’ll pull you up, I won’t let you die!”

Masaru had barely managed to grab a hold of Rem's ankle. He was on his stomach with his arm reaching into the hole.

"Why... why are you trying to save me now, you traitor!"

Masaru had betrayed me. I wasn't expecting anything from him. Our so called friendship was something that could only happen because we were living peaceful lives in Japan. It was a flimsy bond that held no weight here.

"It's 'cause we're friends!"

"Fuck you, you betrayed me and sided with Higuchi!"

"You're right! I betrayed you once! But not again, I can't betray you again!"

W-what was wrong with him... what was he trying to achieve with this. He was just being an idiot. Now was not the time to play hero. He wasn't Souma Yuuto, and he couldn't be a hero like that no matter how hard he tries.

Shit man, don't risk your life for this.

"I'm sorry, Kotarou... I'm sorry I punched you... I was too weak, I'm supposed to be a Warrior, but I'm just weak, and scared and..."

Stop. Stop it already. I don't want to hear your regrets.

I hate you. Because you betrayed me. You're the one I hate the most, right under Higuchi. I wanted to curse you.

"I beat you up, and just left you there... I knew that you wouldn't be fine, and I was scared, what if Kotarou d-dies, I kept thinking that... I just kept thinking that I had to say sorry, I'm sorry!"

Stop, shut up. Stop confessing, I don't want to hear it.

I'm supposed to begrudge you, curse you... ahh, dammit, I fail as a Shaman. I can't stop the tears.

"I know this isn't something I can just say sorry for! So I'll pull you up, I'll save you Kotarou!"

"Masaru!!"

"— — *Haah*, these guys are trying to bore me to death."

All the while Masaru was desperately crying out his heartfelt apology and reaffirming his resolve, the heartless Thief sent his merciless gaze down at the two of us.

And the gleaming knife in his hand had already swung down.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

“Hope you had a nice chat there, Saitou. But playtime is over.”

The knife stabbed into Masaru’s shoulder. It had gone very deep. Deep red blood flowed down his arm, streamed across Rem, and dripped on my face.

“You can let him die now. Don’t worry, just letting go probably won’t count as you killing him, probably.”

“Urgh, u-gh... no. I won’t... please, Higuchi, don’t...”

“Oi oi, what’s with this piece of trash. Where’s all that courage coming from, bitch.”

Masaru screamed, once again Masaru screamed in pain. Higuchi had grabbed the deeply lodged knife handle and twisted it further into Masaru’s shoulder.

“It’s fine, Masaru! Let go already! I can handle it, don’t worry!”

“W-what do you mean, you can handle it... Kotarou, I got this, don’t worry, I’m not letting go...”

How was he even doing this? He was being subjected to pain he shouldn’t be able to handle. It shouldn’t be possible for him to act like it was nothing.

“Let go, dammit, come on!”

“No... If I let go now, I can never, be your friend, anymore... I won’t do it. I won’t be a worthless piece of trash like that... again! I won’t let go, even if I die, I won’t let go!”

“A’ight, then die.”

Higuchi instantly pulled out his butterfly knife, as if to trample down that courage, as if to crush that wish, as if to silence that scream, as if to laugh as he burned it all down. Blood spurt out from Masaru’s shoulder, scattering everywhere as Higuchi flicked his knife and aimed once again.

“Ah, kh, hhh...”

A raspy noise leaked from Masaru's throat as blood flowed out. Sprayed out. Higuchi had aimed precisely at his carotid artery.

“No, Masaru... Masaru, say something...”

He couldn't. Blood was overflowing from Masaru's mouth, so much that he couldn't even breathe let alone answer.

“Ah well. That’s another idiot gone. He only had to be my slave and he would’ve lived a while longer. Courage don’t work for idiots. Once he disobeyed me, he was as good as dead already.”

Rambling on like he was annoyed, Higuchi stabbed Masaru on his back. This wasn't to deal any fatal damage but just because he felt like doing some extra violence. He kept stabbing his weapon on the back of another human being, of a classmate, needlessly, callously, endlessly.

“M-Masaru...”

“Woah, is this legit? He didn’t let go even after he died.”

I've killed lots of monsters, and I've seen people die. So I could tell immediately. I could tell that Masaru was dead. His life had been exhausted and he was gone. My ointments wouldn't do shit at this point. Masaru would never open his eyes again.

But He still held on. He still held on to Rem's leg, he still held on to me so that I wouldn't fall into the hell below.

“Haha, this is rich. This his pride or something? Even a loser like him got to show off in the end. Good for you, Momokawa——”

Laughed Higuchi as he kicked Masaru's corpse off the edge.

“— You got to be friends again before you died. Have fun in hell together.”

"Higuchiiii!! youuu, bastaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrddddd!!!"

And then, for the third time, I was falling. Together with Masaru's dead body, I fell into the depths of the sacrificial pitfall.

Chapter 84: Shaman VS Thief (1)

“—— Tsk. Nah, can't see all the way.”

I was staring down into the dark pitfall where Momokawa had fallen down along with the fatass.

It might seem like I was being too cautious, but lots of stories have it somehow turn out that they were alive after all and that crap. You'd be an idiot to believe that they're dead without even confirming the corpse. This was something I had learned while fighting the many monsters of the dungeon. That no matter how close to death's door they may be, never, ever let your guard down until you *know* they're dead. This might be like that saying, a candle burns brightest just before it goes out.

“Oi oi, what's the damn hold up?”

This teleport device needs a sacrifice, and offering one human is good enough to make it work. There was some more written down but that was the limit to how far I could interpret the Ancient Tongue on the monolith. Still, I thought I had it right so what gives...

“Meh, I can wait.”

I had already offered up Momokawa and Saitou, that was two sacrifices. If that still wasn't enough, I'd just have to give up. Offering a 3rd sacrifice just wasn't an option.

I couldn't afford to lose Reina A. Ayase just yet. This wasn't due to me not wanting to kill her, no, it was because fighting her with my current strength wasn't wise. Her powers were a real pain, and I'd be killed if she really wanted me dead.

The problem wasn't Reina herself but those Guardian Beasts under her control. They had a will of their own and could act independent of her, their master, so even when she was asleep, they'd maintain a vigilant watch. There were not animals, but Spirits as implied by Reina's Job title, so they didn't get hungry or tired either. As long as Reina had mana, they could function around

the clock. It was hard to find an opening like that.

“Hey, Thief God, if you’re listening, I killed two of them, so get me a good Skill, a’ight? Something I can use against magic, man that felt dumb to say...”

My senses suddenly shot alert. This was Search · Hi Sense, no doubt about that. I used this Skill so much, I wouldn’t mistake it for anything.

“What, the fuck is this... Something’s coming, but what...”

Momokawa did say that some powerful monster might get summoned, so was that it? Like, one sacrifice gets the transfer magic activated, but any more gets me a monster... Shit. I wasn’t even sure because I couldn’t read everything that was there.

No, this was different. I could tell.

“Tsk, the little motherfucker’s alive——”

I could feel it clearly. This ‘threat’ had a burning hostility specifically towards me, this enemy was coming for me, climbing up from the depths of that dark hell.

“Higuuuchiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

“Fucking had to be you, Momokawaa!!”

I could feel a boiling grudge in Momokawa’s scream as that large, dark something leaped out of the pitfall.

“I’m not dying here, and neither is Masaru——”

“Shit, you gone crazy or what... that thing isn’t alive. I killed Saitou.”

The identity of that dark something was Momokawa, directing his cheeky, stray cat-like eyes at me in vengeful rage, along with Saitou, no, something that only looked like him.

I said it looked the same, but it had some distinct differences.

Over all, it still had on the same gakuran and had Saitou’s swords hung at its waist. The most jarring difference was that its eyes showed only white, completely rolled back, as if it was dead. Because it was dead. Saitou was dead.

But there he was, still standing. Saitou, while carrying Momokawa, had

climbed up the pitfall in a furious speed, and the two were now standing in front of me for a rematch.

“I’m not dying until I get to kill you, Higuchi!”

“You, raised him from the dead...”

That was all I could think of to explain it, and that was how it looked.

All around Saitou’s corpse, I could see parts of that Mud Doll, Rem, stuck to it like pieces of armor. He had the Mud Doll’s skull fixed on his head like a biker’s helmet, and its arms, legs and shoulders were covered in that tough, green armor. To top it off, it even had a long mantis scythe growing out of its right hand.

It appeared as if Momokawa was controlling the corpse through his Mud Doll. And the fact that it could climb out of the pitfall meant that it wasn’t weak. The walls along that hole were the same stone walls as in all the rooms here. They were flat enough that any normal human would never get a firm grip, but it could be dug into using sharp enough claws.

So the only reason it could’ve climbed back up so fast, was with inhuman strength and those sharp claws I could see on its fingers, likely fashioned from Mud Doll parts.

“Tsk. You got another thing coming if you think you can kill me. But I’ll tell you this. Using a weak loser like Saitou was a big mistake.”

“No, with the two of us, with me and Masaru, we can, and we will, kill you.”

“Don’t get cocky, Momokawa. Don’t think I don’t have other ways to kill you——”

Like tying him up and throwing him into the Boss Room. If it works, then the Boss will die when it kills him, I can get the core and be on my way.

Plus, throwing knives wasn’t all I was capable of. Like him, I also had a pretty good binding Skill.

“Get ready, Higuchi. I’ll give you a painful death.”

“Hah, bring it, Momokawa. I’ll beat into you what it means to have the weakest Job!”

To be frank, it was a miracle that this even worked. That, or the sheer depth of Masaru's regret as he died made it possible. It worked so well, that I almost thought his spirit was still helping me.

“— —Vile Mud Doll!!”

I cast my Curse, all the while falling closer to the bottom of the dark pit.

For ingredients, I had my blood, Rem as the base, and a set of new parts, Masaru... Masaru's corpse. I was sure it'd work.

I was attempting to reform my Mud Doll on the fly. I had already done it once when I solo battled a Knight Mantis. I had put Rem in Rotten Bog and recast her creation spell which had caused her to combine with the Bog. With that as a precedent, I knew that the process took only an instant. If it took any longer, I'd likely go splat at the bottom of this abyss.

Higuchi's biggest mistake was using a pitfall this long. If this was only as deep as human hands could allow, I wouldn't have had the luxury to conjure up countermeasures.

“GU, GO, GAGA...”

Clacked Rem. Both Rem and Masaru's body were instantly swallowed up by a familiar chaotic shadow substance. They had turned into a swirling glob of Curse for only a moment before the end result was revealed.

The chaos vanished, leaving Masaru with Rem's parts stuck on to him like armor.

Masaru quickly righted his body while mid air, grabbed me with a hand, and used the claws on his other hand to latch onto the pitfall wall. It seemed as though Rem's bony hand had fused with Masaru's, making those claws sharp and metallic in nature. The claws released sparks as they dug into the walls, slowing our descent.

“T-that was scary.”

I muttered after we'd finally stopped. I was clinging on to Masaru's back while he was using both his arms and legs to grab the walls like a bug.

Looking down, I could actually see a glimpse of the bottom now. Long, conical

spikes were lined up at the very bottom of the pit, ready to kill anything that fell in. I was close. Almost too close.

“Masaru, no, I guess you’re Rem now.”

Of course, I knew that already. I hadn’t resurrected him. This wasn’t that sort of magic. This was the same old Vile Mud Doll, in other words, Masaru was only used as parts.

“Sorry, Masaru... I’m a Shaman after all, this is all I can do.”

There might be something really fucked up about me if I had to use my own friend’s body in this kind of ritual. But it’s because I’m his friend that I could understand how he would feel about this.

“And I know you’ll help me out man. You and me, we’ll kill Higuchi together.”

Revenge was the only thing left to him. He wouldn’t dare rest in peace before ending the life of his killer. So what if his own corpse was used to achieve it? That just proved the depth of his grudge.

I knew this not as a Shaman, but as a fellow human being. This grudge, this hate was only human. I had to kill Higuchi by my own hands if I hoped to let Masaru pass on.

“GOOAAAA...”

Cried Rem, who had possessed, or rather, was in control of Masaru’s body. This looked different from the usual where she would compound and merge parts and ingredients into herself. It almost looked incomplete...

“This isn’t a Mud Doll anymore. It might as well be Necromancy.”

Magic that could raise the dead. It certainly felt like something a Shaman should be able to do. Maybe if my Job was Necromancer instead, I could’ve done this from the start. Or maybe a Shaman was a higher class of Job that could use Necromancer Skills too.

I couldn’t really tell whether this was Mud Doll or some new Curse magic that spontaneously happened. But the details didn’t matter right now.

The important thing was that Masaru was helping me. He was able to stop our fall by piercing into the walls, proving that this Corpse Doll had tremendous

strength and reflexes.

“Let’s go, Masaru!”

“GAAAA!!”

Masaru’s Corpse Doll was even faster than the Pawn Ants in the Insect Caves, looking at the insane speed with which he climbed up the pitfall.

“Higuuuchiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

“Fucking had to be you, Momokawaa!!”

Higuchi was no doubt surprised by the fact that I could survive a fall like that, but his Thief senses were sharp as ever, and he had already taken a combat stance, ready to fight us.

His right hand held the butterfly knife he had used to kill Masaru, and in his left, he held a well made long knife. He held both knives in backhand grips, and his form looked practiced and refined.

“I’m not dying here, and neither is Masaru——”

“Shit, you gone crazy or what... that thing isn’t alive. I killed Saitou.”

Yeah, he was right. Masaru was dead. He had his throat slit and had bled out like a tap. It’d be strange if he was still alive.

And now, we’ll be thoroughly making him pay for giving Masaru that cruel, painful end.

“I’m not dying until I get to kill you, Higuchi!”

“You, raised him from the dead... tsk. You got another thing coming if you think you can kill me. But I’ll tell you this. Using a weak loser like Saitou was a big mistake.”

“No, with the two of us, with me and Masaru, we can, and we will, kill you.”

“Don’t get cocky, Momokawa. Don’t think I don’t have other ways to kill you——”

Even I had some ideas. He could easily tie me up and throw me into the Boss Room, for example. I wasn’t naive enough to think that I could manage something as long as I had Pain Return.

“Get ready, Higuchi. I’ll give you a painful death.”

“Hah, bring it, Momokawa. I’ll beat into you what it means to have the weakest Job!”

Oh I’ll bring it alright. I’ll use every curse I have to grant you the most painful death.

Chapter 85: Shaman VS Thief (2)

“Twine into hairs, O rotten red, become thread which violates flesh and bone—— Redhair Twine.”

I grabbed stones in both of my hands, attached them to Redhair Twine strands, and flung them forward.

At the same time, Rem drew the sword hung at Masaru’s waist and dashed forward.

We were going with the usual formation. The current Rem had enough battle prowess to be considered a proper vanguard, so I could calmly provide support from the rear.

“Oh, red ones now,” Higuchi exclaimed “Lemme guess, they hurt real bad if they hit?”

It looked like he could easily predict the trajectories of my redhair tentacles. Higuchi only needed to sway his body to the side to dodge the acidic wires coming so straightforwardly at him. Not only that, he even cut one down with his knife.

“The hell, this was one of my good knives, man.” Higuchi complained.

With a hiss of melting metal, that knife now had a small chip on its blade. With that, and obviously from the way Redhair Twine looked, he should’ve figured out its acidic nature.

“GAAA!” Right as Higuchi finished warding off my attack, it was Rem’s turn to strike.

“Heh, this thing’s doing a lot better than that bitch Saitou ever did!”

Rem moved fast, as if she had perfectly assimilated Masaru’s Warrior specs into her new body. But despite that, she failed to cut down Higuchi with that powerful slash just now.

Higuchi held his own against Rem’s expertly flowing series of sword strikes. He almost made it look too easy, he was dodging, parrying and counter-

attacking the corpse-doll without any change in his confident expression.

“Tsk, of course a dead body doesn’t feel pain,” Higuchi spat as his butterfly knife lightly carved into Rems side. Some blood spurted out but the injury had done nothing to slow her assault.

He must’ve realized that fighting close range wouldn’t get him anywhere, and he swiftly withdrew a few paces.

“There!” I yelled, taking aim.

“Nah!” Shouted Higuchi, easily dodging.

Taking distance from Rem had only made him more open to my own attacks. My cursed red hairs were easy to reconstruct even if split.

He could sidestep or cut away all he wanted, but my Redhair Twine would only keep coming, relentlessly.

“— Tch! This is getting nowhere,” Higuchi griped in annoyance.

I felt the same. I wasn’t hitting at all.

Rem would close in again, match her slash with mine, Higuchi would dodge it somehow, take a few steps back, then get attacked by my redhair. The cycle kept repeating.

Were we cornering him? No, judging by his expression, that didn’t seem to be the case. We kept repeating this back and forth but it seemed that Higuchi was losing neither stamina nor concentration. He just looked irritated.

Should I keep at it? Could I wear him down like this? No, that was a bad plan.

He was stat-wise stronger than me, meaning that the longer this fight continued, the more time he’d have to adapt to our two-front attacks and think up a way to strike back. I also couldn’t say with confidence whether my concentration could hold out until then.

It should be... about time.

“Swell, Rotten Bog.”

The strands of Redhair Twine Higuchi had been cutting away were all over the place. In other words, drops of my blood were everywhere, meaning that now, I

could manifest Rotten Bogs anywhere of my choosing.

“Huh!? Fuck!!” Higuchi cursed.

Red bog acid bubbled up from under Higuchi’s feet as though he had stepped on a trap. Of course, his danger sense triggered immediately, letting him jump away.

Higuchi’s feet touched the corrosive water only for a moment before he leapt up and away from the bog’s effective radius. The acid had only slightly melted the soles of his shoes so no real damage was done.

“Swell, more!”

I wrung out my mana to expand the bog as wide as possible. Now that he had seen Rotten Bog I had to make use of it before he had the time to adapt.

“Kh!?” Higuchi winced.

The bog had suddenly expanded and that had clearly caught him off guard. That was probably the first time I saw panic rise in Higuchi’s expression.

I did it. I thought as my Rotten Bog grew beyond the spot Higuchi was set on landing.

“Die!!” I yelled.

This time, his shoes weren’t going to protect him. They’d only need to melt away a little more to expose his bare flesh to the acid. For a Thief, having their feet damaged should be devastating. With his agility gone, he would no longer be able to so easily dodge Rem’s powerful slashes that borrowed their might from the Warrior Job.

He had to protect his feet at all cost. He pitched his hands downward.

Of course, sacrificing his hands wasn’t going to be any better. His ability to fight would drop either way.

“Gh, goddaammiiiiit!!” Higuchi roared, managing to save his hands.

He had to sacrifice something else though. Namely, the long knife in his left hand.

He had stabbed the blade into the bog acid, causing it to vigorously start

melting. But the few seconds that knife took to submerge had given Higuchi all the time he needed to make his escape.

He put strength into his left arm, supporting the weight of his whole body on the single limb, and then jumped once again. I was amazed at how smooth and acrobatic his each movement was during that whole process, but figured that he could only do this by drawing out the full potential of his Thief Job. *No, this is not the time to get impressed.*

“Tsk,” I clicked my tongue, “that didn’t go as planned...”

“You sure pullin’ all the stops, eh Momokawaa!”

He only had to throw away one of his knives to escape Rotten Bog.

Dammit, if only I’d made it deeper. But no, I didn’t have enough focus to both expand and deepen it at the same time. I didn’t have a hexagram either. Forcefully broadening it had made the bog shallower than normal.

No matter, I could think about this later. I had hoped to end it with Rotten Bog, but now I should prioritize thinking up a new——

“Yeah, shouldn’t take it easy just cause he’s a mage,” Higuchi voiced as if coming to a decision. “I’ll finish it quick.”

That was when Higuchi’s eyes changed. He had been underestimating me, and had almost paid dearly for it, so he was now going to get serious.

I may not have his danger sensing intuition but I could sense that clear change in his mindset. With no time to think up a plan B, I sent in redhair to somehow try to delay him.

“Shit!” He was fast.

He once again effortlessly snaked clear of the acidic strands as he made his move, much faster than before.

He had used his empty left hand, grabbing another knife from his waist he threw it—— at least, that was how it looked.

“GAGA!?”

Rem, who had been closing in, collapsed on the spot.

Rem didn't feel pain. Even if her body got stabbed, it shouldn't prevent her from moving. One knife wound from Higuchi shouldn't have been enough to stop her.

Which meant, Rem's sudden fall wasn't caused by the knife.

"Huh, wires!?"

"Hehe!" Higuchi snickered before making another knife throwing motion. "Yer not the only one with a binding skill!"

That was when I realized: he was not throwing one knife, but two, and at the same time.

And in between those two knives was thin metallic wire. These knives, connected to each other, were not meant to stab directly, but only have the wire in between connect. Once caught, the knives themselves would wrap around the target via centrifugal force.

Higuchi had used his first throw of wired knives to bind Rem's legs, and used the second one just now to restrain her arms and torso.

"Rem! Use your Mantis blades——"

"Nope!" Higuchi yelled, moving to Rem's position in the blink of an eye. He then struck a powerful kick on the immobile corpse doll.

"GA!!"

What in the... His kick had actually managed to lift Masaru's overweight body, blowing it away. If I had been hit by that, there was no telling how many bones would be shattered, not to mention how my internal organs would undoubtedly be paste.

"Aaaaaaaah!!" I panicked. With Rem out of the picture, there was nothing to stop Higuchi from coming right for me. Which was exactly what he was doing.

I could only keep piling on the redhair, while also adding in Blackhair Bind from his own shadow. I knew he had the Thru Bind skill, but it might still serve to slow him down.

"Heh, Can't, catch me——"

Fuuuck, why don't they hit! He's this close, and I'm sending in so many tentacles, but they just don't hit!

My black tentacles were jetting out of Higuchi's shadow, sure, but once they did, it wasn't like they could move with the shadow; the shadow was simply a base to grow from, and at the speed he was going at, by the time blackhair bind was out, he wasn't even there anymore. Every new tentacle turned out useless, but despite that, I kept creating more, left foot, right foot, in his every step, not forgetting to pour in the redhair, but in no time—— *Crap, he's here!*

“——Can ya!”

“Ahh!?” I yelped. Higuchi made his move. He, of course, wasn't going to stab me. But he was too close, what, what was he planning? He was moving too fast, I couldn't see what he did, no, I couldn't see anything.

“Ah, huh! My eyes——”

“Oraa!!”

While I was still confused at suddenly being blinded, I felt a sharp blow on my back. *Ugh, w-wh...* I groaned, feeling crushed like a frog under a boot. I found myself knocked down and splayed on the floor.

“Akh, fuck, that hurt.” Higuchi groaned in pain, “Should'a gone easier on that kick.”

I shared the sentiment, literally. But it didn't feel like he'd broken any bones or hit any vital organs, so he sort of was able to hold back.

It was then that I understood just how he was able to blind me so quickly.

Basically, he just used a blindfold. It felt like a cloth was covering my face, maybe a handkerchief. The strip of fabric had enclosed in on my eyes and was held in place using wires.

The way he was able to insta-blindfold me could be one of his Thief skills, or a technique he himself made utilizing his original cleverness alongside his newfound superhuman dexterity. That didn't matter though. I couldn't even imagine putting up a fight in this condition. I wasn't the warrior type so I had no skill or ability to sense stuff like his presence or bloodlust and react to it

instinctively. I honestly believed that a Shaman would never get any skill of that sort.

I had to get it off, but once I thought that far, I'd realized that I couldn't move my arms.

He'd gotten my arms.

"Don't even try to move, Momokawa. These wires are pretty sharp."

Higuchi had had the time to tie up my arms even before I could think clearly after receiving his 'weak' kick. We may have suffered the same damage, but him being a vanguard type meant that he was far more resistant to pain than me. It's the same concept as when Kenzaki-san gut-punched me.

The sort of pain that made me want to cry and scream, he could brush off with a 'Fuck, that hurt bad' and be done with it. And while I writhed defenselessly on the ground, he had taken the opportunity to come up with and execute a method to incapacitate me.

I felt the thin wires digging into my skin. I felt stinging pain in my arms, and not just that, it felt like even my fingers had been wired up. I couldn't even imagine how he had tied me up so thoroughly as it felt like my fingers would slice off if I so much as attempted to unclench my fist.

"A'ight, good enough. Now you can't use those stupid curses anymore."

He clearly had no idea what he was talking about. Did he think I couldn't use curses just because he had sealed my arms—

"I'm talking about that creepy black hair shit. It looks like you can make 'em anywhere but I know how you have to look to make it work. It's plain obvious with how your eyes follow them around every time. You mage types can't really help that though, can ya?"

Oh right. Every one of the Curses I used relied on me having a visual grasp of the situation. Blackhair and Redhair, while I could technically use them without looking, they'd be useless since I couldn't see where to direct them. Rotten Bog, Contrabeat Butterfly and even the all but useless Red Fever were the same, they all greatly relied on sight.

And with my sight gone, I was made powerless.

“It’s all over, Momokawa.”

“Wait!? Ahh! No no noo!!” I cried out.

I was left without even a moment to struggle before he bound up my legs too. My ankles now wired up, Higuchi turned my body so that I was now laid face up. And then, he began dragging.

Was he planning to throw me down the hole? No, he was certain to get Pain Return’ed if he did. Then, it had to be the, the Boss Room!

“Dammit, let, go!”

“Haha,” Higuchi cackled, “ya sure can scream. You sound more like a girl than some of the ones I know.”

Shit, shit, no no no, this is all sorts of bad, actually crying and screaming isn’t helping this situation. Think, man, think. How do I get out of—

“Oi, settle down. I don’t need any more damage from your stupid curse.”

Ahhh, it hurt. I got too reckless and ended up struggling against the wires too much.

But that was all I *could* do. Higuchi’s wires hadn’t loosened at all. Compared to him, I had the relative strength of an infant. No struggling on my part would so much as slow his steady march.

Time was running out. The Boss Room had to be only a few steps away. Rem was still down. And even if she wasn’t, and had attempted to release me from Higuchi, she wouldn’t make it. I was on my own, I had to do something on my own.

But I had no physical means of worming out of this. I was weak. I had my curses, and nothing more.

If I could fight back with my tentacle curses, I would’ve done so already. But I couldn’t; Higuchi had seen how I used Redhair Twine by releasing them from my palms so he had sealed those hands with razor edge wires. He had made the smart move. My tentacles weren’t so thin so as to allow me to cast them from a closed fist, and if I tried to open them, I’d lose my fingers.

Sure, I could make them thinner. I could make them as thin as hair and slither them out from a gap, but then they would be too thin to do any real damage. Wait, maybe I could make thin Redhair and melt the wires... No, I wasn't sure I could manage that without him noticing. Shit. If Higuchi notices me trying anything, I was sure to receive another kick that would leave me wheezing in pain.

No, if I wanted to get out of this, I needed to use as many tentacles as I normally would. Using an overwhelming amount should allow me to distract Higuchi.

Should I risk losing my fingers? Or maybe use Redhair to free my hands first— wait, wasn't there something else? A way for me to create a large number of tentacles even if I couldn't see or use my hands? Yes, yes there was!

“... Blackhair Bind”

Right as I said that, my head felt ever so slightly heavy. This wasn't because I was concentrating hard, nor was it due to a fast depletion of mana. The top of my head felt physically heavier.

The reason for it was simple: I was creating Blackhair Bind from my own hair. I had even tried this once before so I felt exceedingly stupid for completely forgetting about it until just now.

“Wha!?” Higuchi voiced in surprise.

It had worked. I only had to reach for the hand that was dragging me along from the leg. I couldn't see, yes, but I could still normally make out where the parts of my body were. And right now, my numerous Blackhair tentacles had bound themselves around Higuchi's arms.

“Tch!!” Higuchi spat.

It was a strange, slippery feeling. I could no longer feel anything around the Blackhair. He had used Thru Bind, no doubt.

Higuchi had been forced to let go of me to escape being caught, and this gave me ample time to melt off the wires immobilizing me.

I roughly wiggled my now extended front bangs to un-blindfold myself. The

handkerchief was now off, and I could finally see my current condition.

The bastard had wired me up really elaborately. I immediately cast Redhair from my closed palms and with the Rotten Bog level acidity possessed by these red tentacles, they quickly began dissolving the steel-like wiring entangling my fingers and arms.

I suddenly felt really glad I wasn't affected by my own curses. I'd be in a bad place right now if that powerful acid melted everything without distinction.

My fingers were freed. I opened my fist to let out more Redhairs and started working on the wires on the rest of my limbs.

"Almost,"

There. I was free, unbound, liberated. But Higuchi wasn't about to let that last.

"No you don't!"

He was already holding a pair of wired knives and within spitting distance of me.

"Cover!" I yelled.

I quickly swished my head, spreading my Black(head of)hair in front of me like a shield. Higuchi's wired knives were, in the end, ordinary knives. They'd at least get obstructed with a thick layer of tentacle hair blocking the way.

I didn't have the visual prowess to see Higuchi actually throwing the knife with the level of agility he boasted, but this time, I knew where he was going to aim, and so, could put up a defensive.

"Shit, you and your goddamn curses!"

And as I'd expected, my Blackhair tentacles had managed to catch the knives without issue. Higuchi's sharp throwing knives did cut off some of the hair, but against the sheer density of tentacles, they had lost all momentum.

Higuchi quickly changed tactics. He surmised that thrown knives weren't going to be of use so he endeavored to close in on his own, his butterfly knife in hand.

Which was not at all good for me, since he could easily escape any binding.

“GAGAAAAAAAAA!!”

And that’s when Rem rushed in from the side, roaring.

Great, she’d made it. And it looked like it definitely took some effort. I could see many thin cuts all over Masaru’s body.

But wounds meant nothing for an unfeeling corpse-doll. Her sword ready to kill, Rem leapt at Higuchi.

“Outta my way, fataaass!!”

Reacting incredibly fast, Higuchi switched target from me to Rem, stopping her powerful slash with his single knife.

At this rate, we’d likely return to the previous back and forth. Rem alone was unable to overpower him, and me using my Redhair from a distance meant that he could dodge or cut them away.

To kill him, I needed something more.

“Ooooooooooooooh!!!” I bellowed.

I didn’t try to think on it. While Rem and Higuchi were in the middle of their melee, I charged in, tentacles and all.

I figured I needed to put my own body on the line if I wanted to stop that overpowered Thief.

“Youu little——” Higuchi sensed I was about to do something.

But Rem, implicitly understanding my plan, closed in further to prevent Higuchi from backstepping away.

“Gotchaa!!”

And thanks to that single moment his feet were stopped, I succeeded in pouncing on to his back.

I used all my Blackhair to bind Higuchi along with myself. It didn’t matter how, I had to be willing to use any means possible to slow down this psychopath, just enough to make this work.

“Don’t let up, Rem!”

“Motherfuckeeeeeer!!”

Higushi would, of course, try to shake me off, but he also had Rem and her sword to deal with, and that posed the more immediate danger. I clung on to Higuchi’s back as if for dear life.

Even while supporting my weight, Higuchi was managing to cope with Rem’s sword stroke after stroke. Not enough. So why don’t I attack too!

“Redhair Twine!!”

I let out as much as I could. I was already clinging on him and he was doing his part to shake me off. I didn’t exactly have the accuracy to aim for a weak spot like his neck, and so just lashed out randomly. Anywhere the redhair struck was sure to add damage.

“Akh, fuuuuck—— Guard Skin!!” Higuchi cried.

By the time my redhairs snaked themselves around Higuchi’s arms, legs and body, he had surrounded himself with a dim, blue glow. The redhair still hissed all around him, which usually indicated to something melting, but his clothes looked fine.

What, is this aura thing protecting his whole body? What the hell! Thieves even get full body defensive skills, this is so unfair!

“GA, GAA!!”

“Ghh, kh, fukh——” Higuchi leaked. It seemed using that omnidirectional barrier spell was taking a toll on him too. He must’ve needed a lot of mana and concentration to maintain it, and this had markedly dulled his movements. This must’ve been his trump card for when he really needed an out.

Good. It’s going well, one more push and—— But then again, I was plenty worn down myself.

“Oraaa!!”

In a momentary pause between their locking blades, Higuchi used Thru Bind. Suddenly, all the red and black tentacles got repelled from his body, and I found myself clinging on to his back with no tentacle support. One twist of his body,

and I was quickly thrown off.

“Whoa!?” I yelped, fell, and doing my best to ignore the falling damage, stood back up. Not good. I needed to get back on there, deal the finisher— but, blackhair bind wasn’t coming out.

“Urp, th-this feels like... shit, I’m out of mana...”

Of course I could still push out a tentacle or two, but my hair had return to normal and the massive amount from before was gone. One thing I was sure of was that if I even tried to pull off that stunt again, I’d instantly fall unconscious.

Blackhair Bind, Redhair Twine, and one XL sized Rotten Bog shouldn’t have drained me so much... It might’ve mostly gone to Rem when I used Corpse Doll on Masaru’s body and practically created a new curse spell.

Goddammit, this clearly wasn’t the time to run out of gas.

“GUGAAAAAA!!” Roared Rem.

“Ooooh!” Higuchi roared back, “Die, diee! I’ll make sure you die this time, biiitch!!”

Rem was close to losing. Higuchi still had his butterfly knife in one hand, and at some point, had brought out another one. Dual wielding knives, Higuchi was carving away at Rem.

Rem was being sliced up everywhere but maybe because his blades were shorter, she wasn’t being dealt any fatal wounds. But despite being slowly brought to the brink, Rem only kept fighting on.

“I’ll fucking kill you! I’ll make sure you die, Saitou, no matter how many times it takes! You think you can beat me, fag! You think a coward like you can kill me, huh bitch!!”

Higuchi was close to his limit too. He hadn’t suffered as many wounds, but he must’ve been running on fumes already. So he yelled. The fact that I, having the weakest Job of Shaman, and Masaru, his cowardly, obese slave, had driven him to a corner like this enraged him to no end.

“GAAA!?”

Finally, Higuchi had achieved a disarming double slash on Rem’s wrist, causing

her sword to drop.

“Haha! And here’s — the finisher!”

One more double, no, it was so fast that I could only see the result, but he instantly made another 4 slashes across Masaru’s neck.

The knives had reaped apart meat and bone, causing Masaru’s neck to drop. No, it hadn’t dropped, it had fallen backwards, still caught by a flimsy thread of skin while exposing the insides leading above and below.

“Hah! See that. That’s your place, on the fucking ground where you belong — oaaahh!?”

Instantly. Rem, who was pitching forward, having been seemingly eliminated, suddenly raised her right arm. She had no sword of course, but what she did had was a Knight Mantis blade, one that I’d obtained after a grueling battle. With a crunch, she operated the joint in her wrist to flip the blade into position. And his newly obtained sword had struck Higuchi right as his guard was down thinking the beheaded zombie was out of the picture.

“Graaaaaaaaah!!” Higuchi wailed, his left arm chopped off. This was the result of him desperately trying to avoid an otherwise fatal wound from an attack he had noticed too late. From the panic brought about by exhaustion close to the point of collapse, to the relief of having thought the fight had been won, everything played in dulling his Thief’s intuition.

For the first time, Higuchi had suffered a major wound.

“Aaaaaaaaah!!” I bellowed, charging straight at him. My one chance had come. I had saved this trump card, waiting patiently for the right moment. My own knife, my Red Knife.

No mana? No curses? Who cares, I could still move, couldn’t I? I still had the magic weapon enchanted by fire. I at least had the strength to stab, burn, sear, kill, a weakened beast.

“Gh, gah, aa... Mo mokawaaaa!!”

Higuchi faced me, his left arm gone, his right, still tightly holding his butterfly knife, the one and only weapon he originally had.

“Akh, ahhhhhhhh!” I screamed in pain.

“Guaaaah, daammiiiitt!” Higuchi did the same.

Higuchi’s knife landed, along with the double ended pain. He was no doubt unable to process the risk of Pain Return any more, and simply wanted to kill the approaching Enemy.

My Red Knife was easily dodged, but in contrast, Higuchi’s butterfly knife stabbed deeply into my right shoulder.

Pain pain pain. Both of us screamed in pain.

“K-kill you... Momokawaa, I’ll, kill... ”

“Ukh, a ahh... shit, ahh...”

But Higuchi could still manage the excruciating pain assaulting both our bodies. It was as if he was drugged up to the point that he didn’t feel anything.

I had even let go of the Red Knife from all that pain and had barely managed to push myself and lift it back up with my left hand. But Higuchi on the other hand looked as if getting stabbed in the shoulder meant nothing. He still held on to his knife absolutely bent on ending my life.

“You’re, fucking, dead!”

Higuchi took a step forward, swaying like a zombie. *Fucking great, he doesn’t even care anymore! But I do! I didn’t work this hard just to die alongside him!*

“GUGAAAAAAA!!”

At that moment, Rem revived. Well technically, she simply hadn’t stopped operating. Rem wasn’t a living creature. Her sheer tenacity was only possible due to her nature as a mana powered corpse-doll.

It didn’t matter whether her neck was connected by only skin. Her face, Masaru’s face, carried an expression of pure and unbridled rage as she bit down on Higuchi’s leg.

“Akkhh, Nnnhhhaaaaaaaah!?” Higuchi howled, and then, fell over. Rem had bitten and torn his Achilles tendon.

That attack ended up being her final contribution. I lost Rem’s connection to

me. What remained was the head that still carried that face of wrath, and now, a chunk of meat between its teeth.

Thanks Masaru. You really did end up saving me at the very end.

“Dieeeeeee, Higuchi!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” I cried as I bore through the pain, positioned the Red Knife and charged into Higuchi. I didn’t bother aiming, I just needed it to stab into him, and I pushed with my whole body to achieve this.

“Urrrgh!! Okh, gh, agh, ahh...”

The red knife plunged into his stomach. Higuchi groaned. It wasn’t so much a scream but a whimper—— but he still managed to knock me away with his explosive strength.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

The red knife, being what it is, let out its fire. Higuchi was getting grilled from the inside centering around his stomach.

The smell of cooked human flesh permeated the room, but Higuchi had yet to give in. His seemingly endless vitality refused to accept his coming death.

Higuchi grabbed the handle sticking out from his stomach, and pulled. Blood gushed out from his mouth and his eyes rolled back exposing their whites, but he pulled. He pulled out the red knife and threw it to the side.

“Heeh... heeh...” Higuchi panted slowly.

And with that, all my weapons had been used and exhausted. No wait, I still had my box cutter... though, I wouldn’t need it, not anymore.

“Gh, ahh... Momokawa, hey... lis ten...”

I reached into my pocket and took out some Ointment A to rub on my shoulder. It was good enough first aid for now.

“Don’t, kill me.”

“Pft... huhu, ahahahahaha!!”

I could only laugh. A dry, guttural laugh.

I walked to Higuchi. I was dizzy from the pain in my shoulder and from my almost empty tank of mana, but I got closer—— and I gave him a kick.

“Grhhh!! Gh, uhh... Come on, Momokawa, don’t... do this.”

“Haha, and here I thought I’d never get to you hear you begging for your life. Guess I was wrong, Higuchi!”

Once again, as Higuchi lay on the white stone floor on his back, I kicked him, pushing forward.

I can, do it. This should, still work.

“Stop, it... don’t do this.”

“I can, and I will. Higuchi, just so we’re clear, I *will* be killing you... also, I’ll be sure to make full use of your death!”

I continued pushing with my arms. He was surprisingly heavy, must be all the muscle. My shoulder hurt. But I could move it if I just bore the pain.

“Listen Momokawa, you, you’ve never killed before right?”

“No, I haven’t, you’ll be my first.”

Right, this was supposed to be my first time killing another human being. I was slowly pushing Higuchi, offering him—— to the pitfall, still wide open as if demanding its promised sacrifice.

“All the more reason to stop... don’t be a murderer, you’ll regret it, for the rest of your life.”

“What about you? You’ve never once regretted killing, have you!”

“Gh, heh... haha... Ya got me there, I’m just like that. I don’t feel much killing someone.”

“Hah, then I’m the same.”

“No, you’re not... you’re not like me, you’re a good person... so stop, while you can.”

Me, a good person? Well, if you compare me to yourself, I’d be pretty upstanding I guess.

“You’re the type, who’s sure to regret becoming a killer... So don’t kill me. Just leave me here, and go.”

“Regret, huh...”

Regrets? Like I give a— well, I couldn’t say that for certain. I didn’t consider myself to be a psychopath like Higuchi, so I might start to regret killing him, someone I’ve considered my worst enemy, somewhere down the line. I might start seeing nightmares about it, and I might sometimes think back, mull over whether killing him really was the right decision.

I was weak. I was physically weak. I had a weak Job. I even had a weak heart.

“Just, go, leave me and go, you win... I promise, not to mess with you, ever again. I swear.”

“You think I was born yesterday... yeah no, fuck off with that!”

Actually, I should really set aside my mental complexes for now. Thinking logically, letting Higuchi live was sure to be more harmful than not.

“Whatever, you killed Masaru... you killed, my best friend... so this is payback.”

“I’m telling you... don’t. Y’know how they say, revenge isn’t worth it...”

“Shut up, you just shut up already!”

“Stop, try and calm down... then you’ll realize, this isn’t something you want to do.”

“Listen to me, Higuchi... I *want* to kill you. And I know that I won’t regret doing it one bit!”

Of course I won’t. I had no intention of suffering because I killed a piece of trash like him.

“You might... and it’ll stay with you, I’m not kidding.”

“I said I won’t! Heck, I’ll tell my future grandkids about it, that once upon a time, their grandpa killed the big baddy. I’ll brag about it, and proudly!”

I was right in killing him. There was nothing wrong with this. I had justice on my side— to kill a killer, thus enacting justice. It was the ultimate contradiction. But I had nothing else to go on. I could only believe it.

“Momokawa... please just,”

“What is it now!? Stay quiet so I can end this!”

“No, please just... do me this, one favor...”

Was this some sort of joke? Did he really think I was going to do him a—

“My knife... please, give it to Yukiko.”

“... What?”

Knife? Oh, he meant his butterfly knife. He’d let it go when he was pulling out the red knife. It was his most noteworthy and deadliest weapon. It was currently on the floor, the blade soaked in blood.

“I just, want her to remember me... we, me and Yukiko, we’re going out, y’see...”

“Wh!? You, and Nagae-san?”

“Yeah... I, really love her... was even thinking, I’d marry her, once I knocked her up.”

What the, now that was a surprise. I could’ve sworn he was going out with Randou-san seeing how they interacted in class. On the other hand, I’d never even seen him looking at Yukiko-san.

“Just do me, this one thing... Oh, and when you do... tell her that I lost my life... fighting the boss, with all I had...”

An idiot. He was an idiot. Not because he was trying to show off to his girlfriend this late, no, it was because,

“... Sorry, I can’t.”

“Oi, fuck your attitude... just do it... ”

“I really can’t... Nagae-san’s already dead.”

Nagae Yukiko was gone. She’d been eaten by the Cannibalizer, by Yokomichi Hajime.

Maybe I shouldn’t tell him that. I was an idiot too. I was trying to be considerate towards someone I was about to kill.

“... Huh... heh, hehe, so... Yukiko, she’s dead too... ”

Of course, I didn't plan on stopping. I'd do this without regrets.

I'd kill him. I'd kill Higuchi. He targeted my life, he killed my best friend, this delinquent, this DQN, I'd kill him, once and for all—— So what if he was grieving the loss of his loved one, I'd kill him.

"A'ight... do it already, Momokawa."

"Sure... goodbye, Higuchi."

I'd expected him to pull a fast one at the end—— but he hadn't. He had completely accepted his loss, and his death. So Higuchi fell, with no resistance whatsoever, into the dark pit of sacrifice.